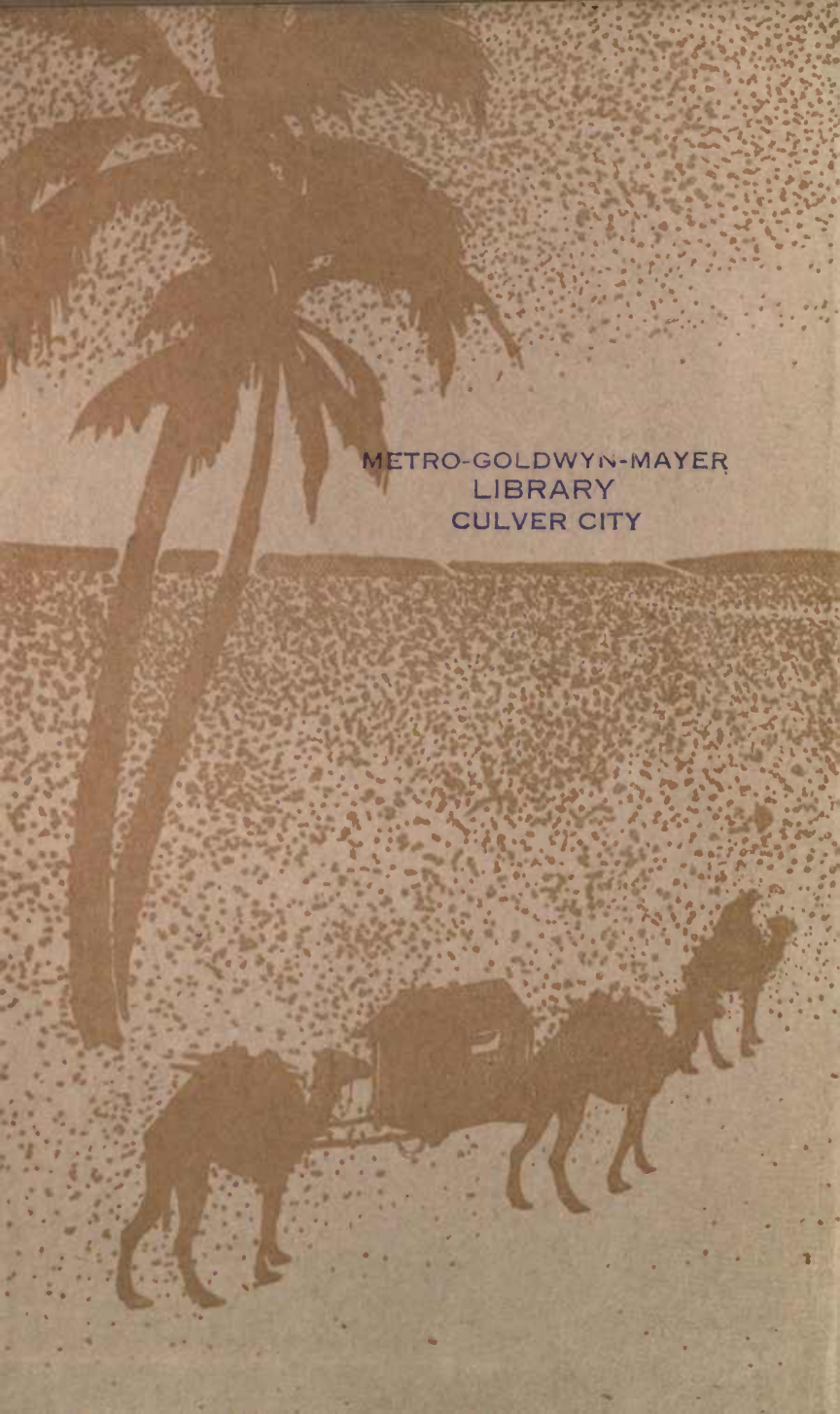
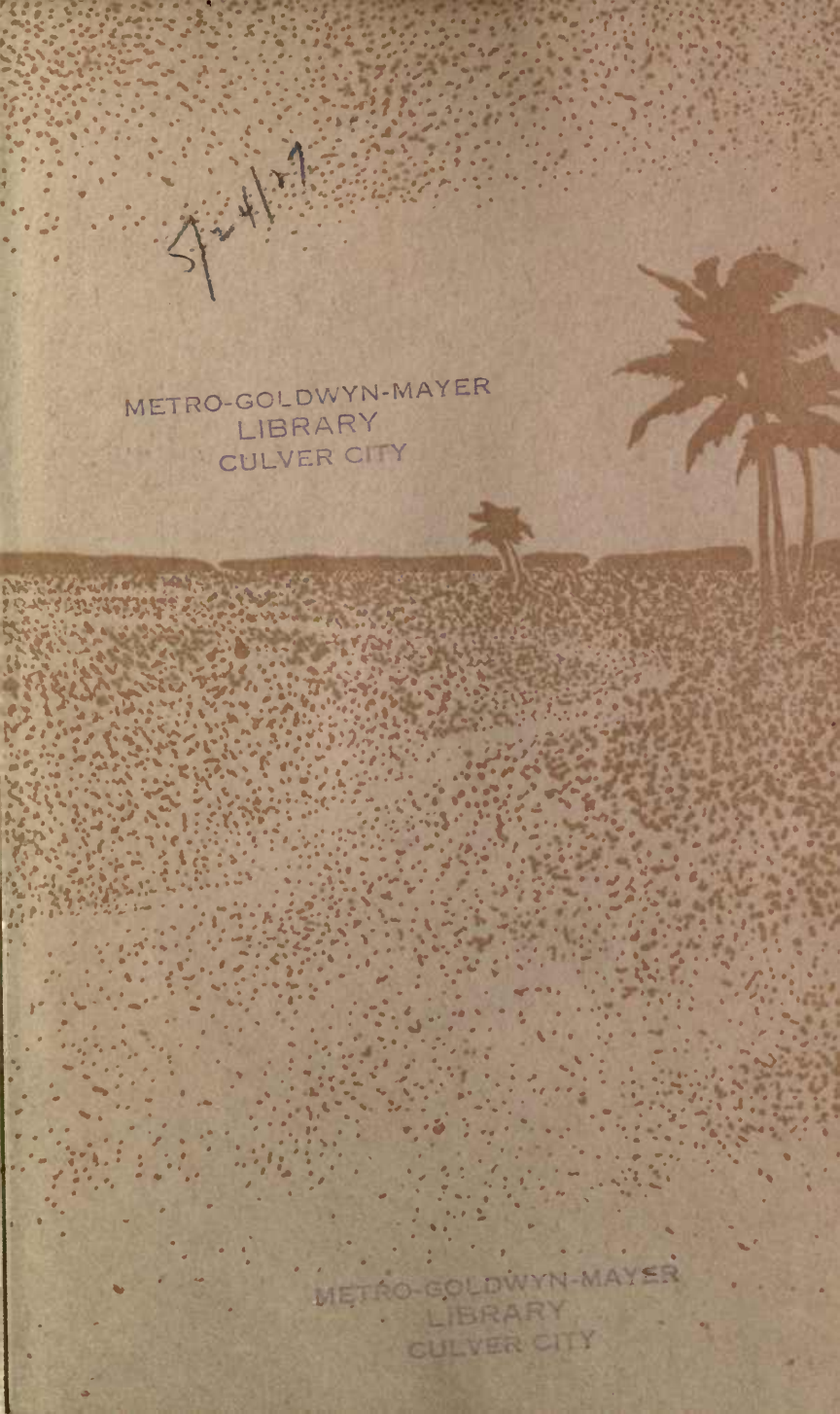
BARBARY SHEEP



ROBERT HICHENS


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"SHE LISTENED, LEANING OVER THE BALUSTRADE"

BARBARY SHEEP

A Novel

BY

ROBERT HICHENS

AUTHOR OF
"THE CALL OF THE BLOOD"
"THE GARDEN OF ALLAH"
ETC. ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



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BARBARY SHEEP

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I

SIR CLAUDE WYVERNE was a simple and rather heavy young Englishman, who had married a very frivolous wife, and who adored her. Adoration leads to abnegation, and Sir Claude, as soon as he was a married man, began to give way to Lady Wyverne. She was a very pretty and changeable blonde. Any permanence seemed to her dull; and this trait secretly agitated her husband, who desired to be permanent in her life and not to be thought dull by her. In order to achieve this result, he decided to present himself as often

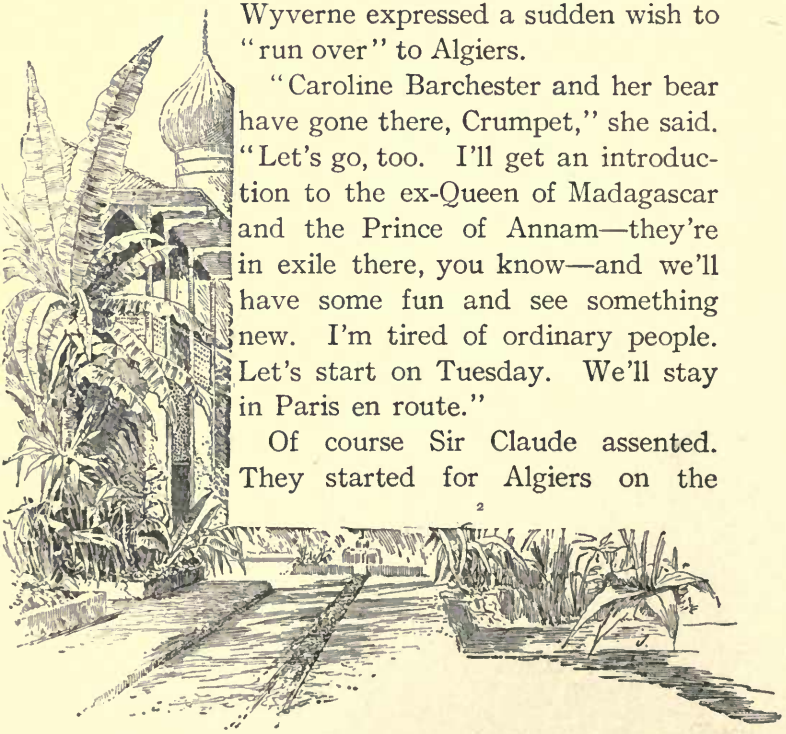


as possible to Lady Wyverne in the seductive guise of change-giver. He was perpetually occupied in devising novelties to keep up her butterfly spirits and in anticipating her every whim.

One spring, just as Sir Claude thought they were going at last to settle down in a pretty country place they had in Leicestershire, Lady Wyverne expressed a sudden wish to "run over" to Algiers.

"Caroline Barchester and her bear have gone there, Crumpet," she said. "Let's go, too. I'll get an introduction to the ex-Queen of Madagascar and the Prince of Annam—they're in exile there, you know—and we'll have some fun and see something new. I'm tired of ordinary people. Let's start on Tuesday. We'll stay in Paris en route."

Of course Sir Claude assented. They started for Algiers on the

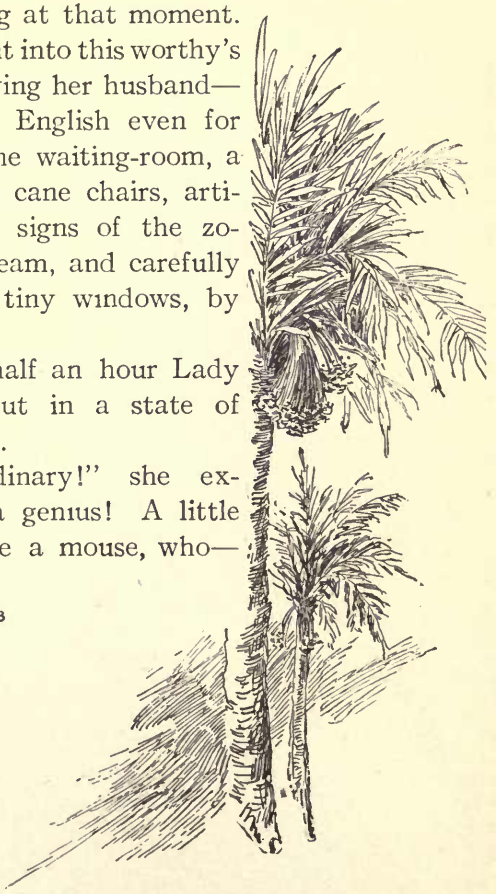


Tuesday, and they stayed in Paris en route.

While they were in Paris they went, against Sir Claude's will, to visit a famous astrologer called Dr. Mélie Étoile, about whom everybody—Lady Wyverne's everybody—happened to be raving at that moment. Lady Wyverne went into this worthy's presence first, leaving her husband—looking unusually English even for him—seated in the waiting-room, a small chamber all cane chairs, artificial flowers, and signs of the zodiac, heated by steam, and carefully shrouded, at the tiny windows, by bead blinds.

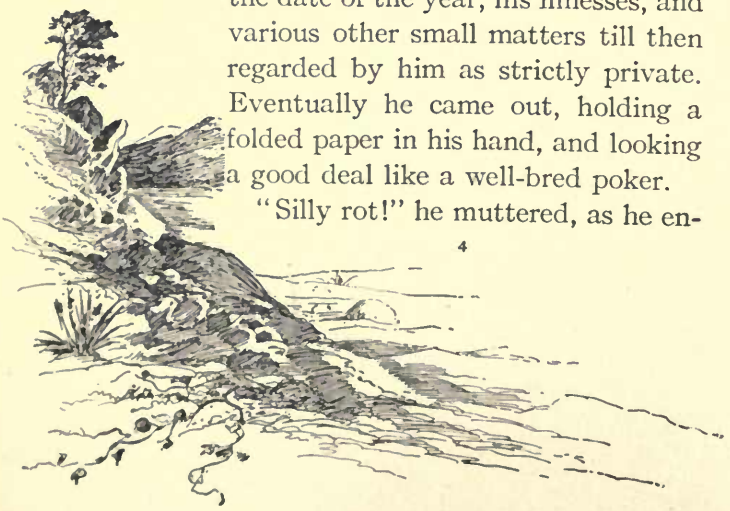
After perhaps half an hour Lady Wyverne came out in a state of violent excitement.

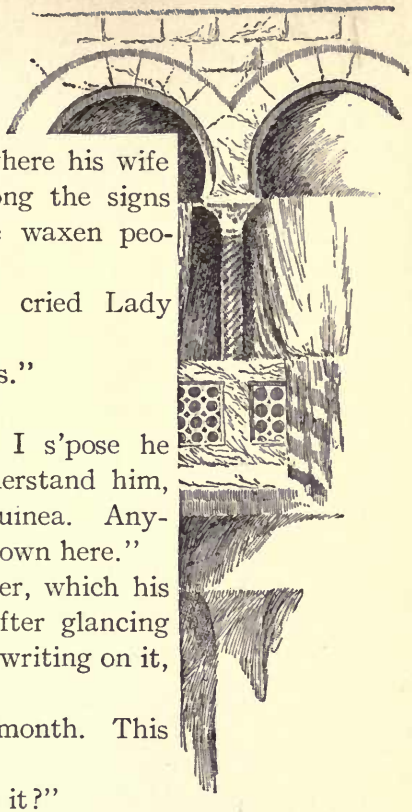
"He's extraordinary!" she exclaimed. "He's a genius! A little bearded thing like a mouse, who—Go in, Crumpet!"



But Sir Claude protested. He had only come to bring his wife. He himself was an absolute sceptic in matters occult, and indeed thought almost everything at all out of the way "damned silly." The idea of submitting himself to an astrologer called "Mélie" roused all his British antagonism. But Lady Wyverne was firm. Indeed, her caprices generally had a good deal of cast-iron in them. In rather less than three minutes, therefore, Sir Claude was sitting at a tiny table opposite to a small old man with a white beard and pink eyes, and answering questions about the hour of night when he was born, the date of the year, his illnesses, and various other small matters till then regarded by him as strictly private. Eventually he came out, holding a folded paper in his hand, and looking a good deal like a well-bred poker.

"Silly rot!" he muttered, as he en-





tered the outer room where his wife was awaiting him among the signs of the zodiac and the waxen peonies.

"What's silly rot?" cried Lady Wyverne.

"What that chap says."

"What does he say?"

"Oh, a lot of rot. I s'pose he thought I couldn't understand him, or he wanted an extra guinea. Anyhow he's written it all down here."

He held out the paper, which his wife eagerly seized. After glancing over the red and purple writing on it, she exclaimed:

"Mars! That's this month. This is March the first."

"I know. Rot, isn't it?"

"Mars," continued Lady Wyverne, reading aloud, "période de luttes, de contestations, d'anxiété, et même de peines de cœur. Eviter de partir en voyage la nuit. Danger d'une—"



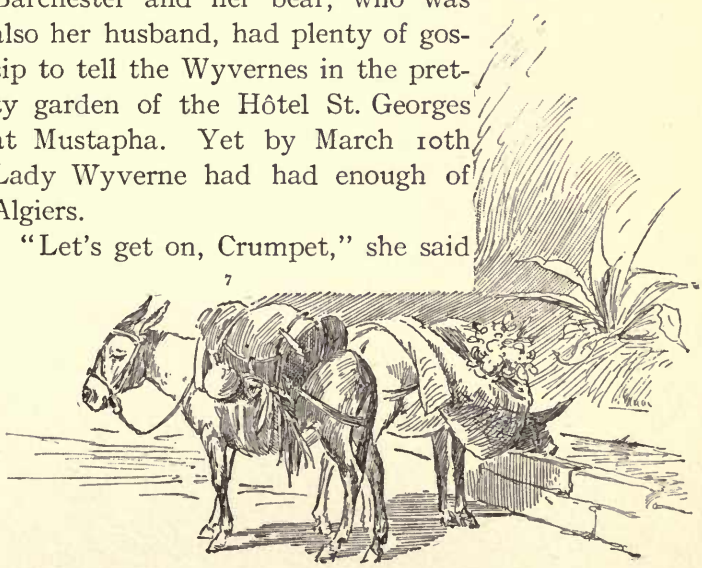
She stopped. Her childish, oval face was unusually grave.

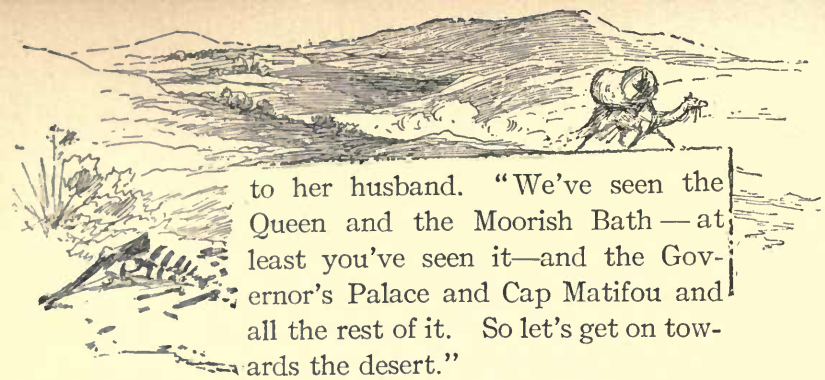
"Rot, isn't it?" said Sir Claude, gazing at his wife with anxiety in his eyes.

II

THE ex-Queen of Madagascar was very gracious in her villa on the hill above Algiers. The Prince of Annam showed Sir Claude his horses, at which Sir Claude scarcely looked, as he was thoroughly preoccupied by the little bag in which his agreeable host confined his luxuriant crop of black hair. Caroline Barchester and her bear, who was also her husband, had plenty of gossip to tell the Wyvernes in the pretty garden of the Hôtel St. Georges at Mustapha. Yet by March 10th Lady Wyverne had had enough of Algiers.

"Let's get on, Crumpet," she said





to her husband. "We've seen the Queen and the Moorish Bath — at least you've seen it—and the Governor's Palace and Cap Matifou and all the rest of it. So let's get on towards the desert."

Sir Claude looked unusually grim and mulish.

"I didn't know we were going to the desert," he said.

"Why, of course. What did we come for?"

"To see Algiers, I thought."

"Nonsense! Algiers is as French as the Rue de la Paix. I want to know all about camels and sand-dunes and Ouled — what are they? Get two berths in the sleeping-car for El-Akbara; there's a dear. It's at the gate of the desert, you know. We'll stay the night and then trot on to Beni-Mora."

Then, as he still looked mulish, she added, mischievously:

"Or I shall think you're silly enough to believe in Mélie Etoile's prophecy."

"Rot!" said Sir Claude. "A fellow like a white—"

"Very well, then, get the tickets!"

He went at once to Cook's and got the tickets, but he looked very grave, almost distressed, as he returned to the hotel. And all that evening he scarcely took his eyes from his wife's pretty, rather doll-like, face.

"I believe you do believe!" she said to him, as they were going up to bed. "'Danger d'une grande perte'—that was what he wrote—'la plus grande perte possible.' What would be the greatest loss possible to you?"

"You ought to know," he replied, almost harshly.

And he caught her little hand and wrung it.

"Oh, Crumpet, my rings!" she cried.



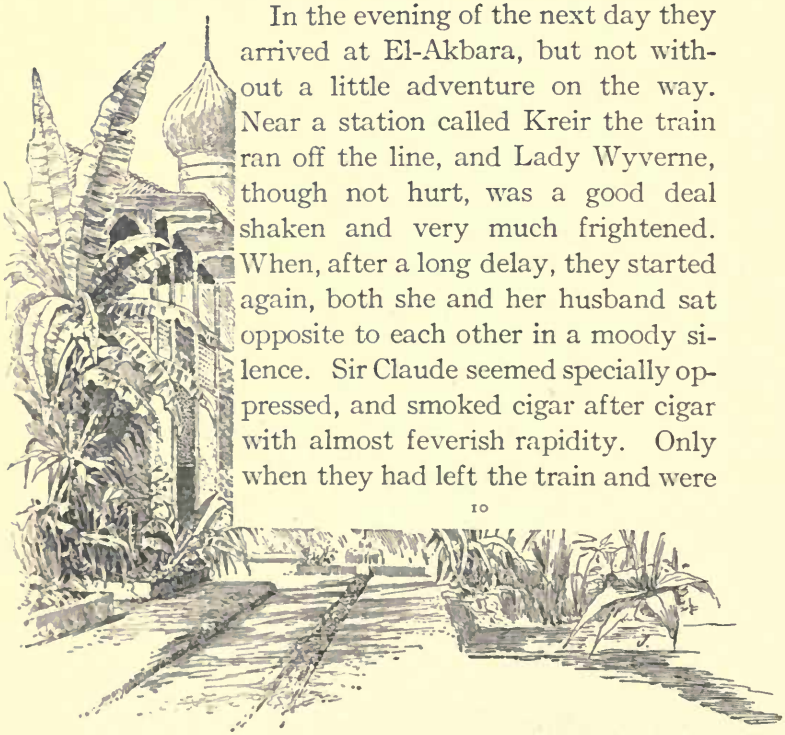
But she left her hand in his, and added, on the landing:

"As if you could lose me out here! Crumpet, you're more foolish than I am, and I'm one mass of superstition, even about going under ladders."

"Then do you believe that pink-eyed astrologer chap?"

"Of course not. Bed, bed, beautiful bed!"

In the evening of the next day they arrived at El-Akbara, but not without a little adventure on the way. Near a station called Kreir the train ran off the line, and Lady Wyverne, though not hurt, was a good deal shaken and very much frightened. When, after a long delay, they started again, both she and her husband sat opposite to each other in a moody silence. Sir Claude seemed specially oppressed, and smoked cigar after cigar with almost feverish rapidity. Only when they had left the train and were



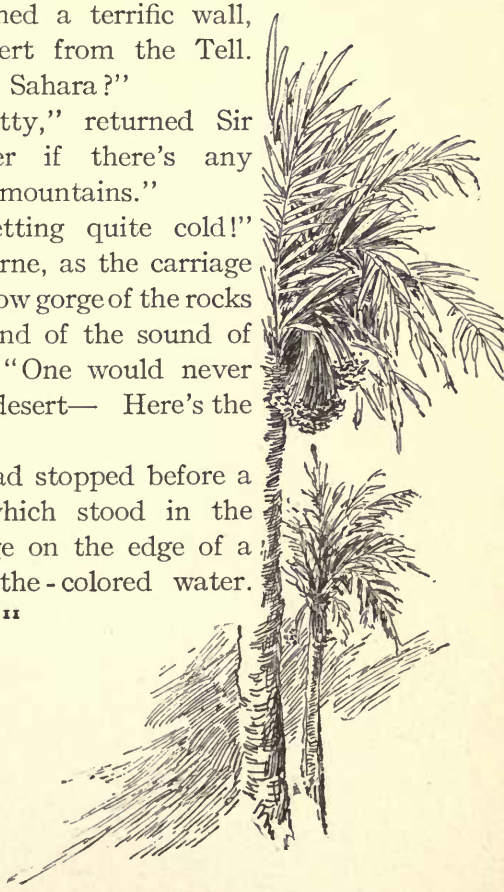
being driven to the little inn, where they were to spend the night, did they both brighten and begin to return to their normal spirits.

"What an extraordinary little place, Crumpet!" said Lady Wyverne, peering through her veil at the towering rocks which formed a terrific wall, dividing the desert from the Tell. "But where's the Sahara?"

"I dunno, Kitty," returned Sir Claude. "Wonder if there's any shootin' in those mountains."

"Why, it's getting quite cold!" cried Lady Wyverne, as the carriage rattled into a narrow gorge of the rocks full of shadows and of the sound of rushing waters. "One would never suppose that the desert— Here's the hotel!"

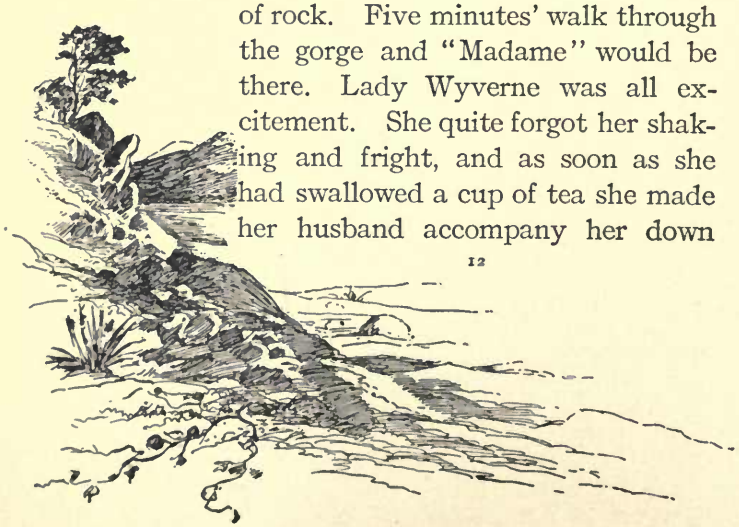
The carriage had stopped before a solitary house which stood in the heart of the gorge on the edge of a turmoil of absinthe-colored water.

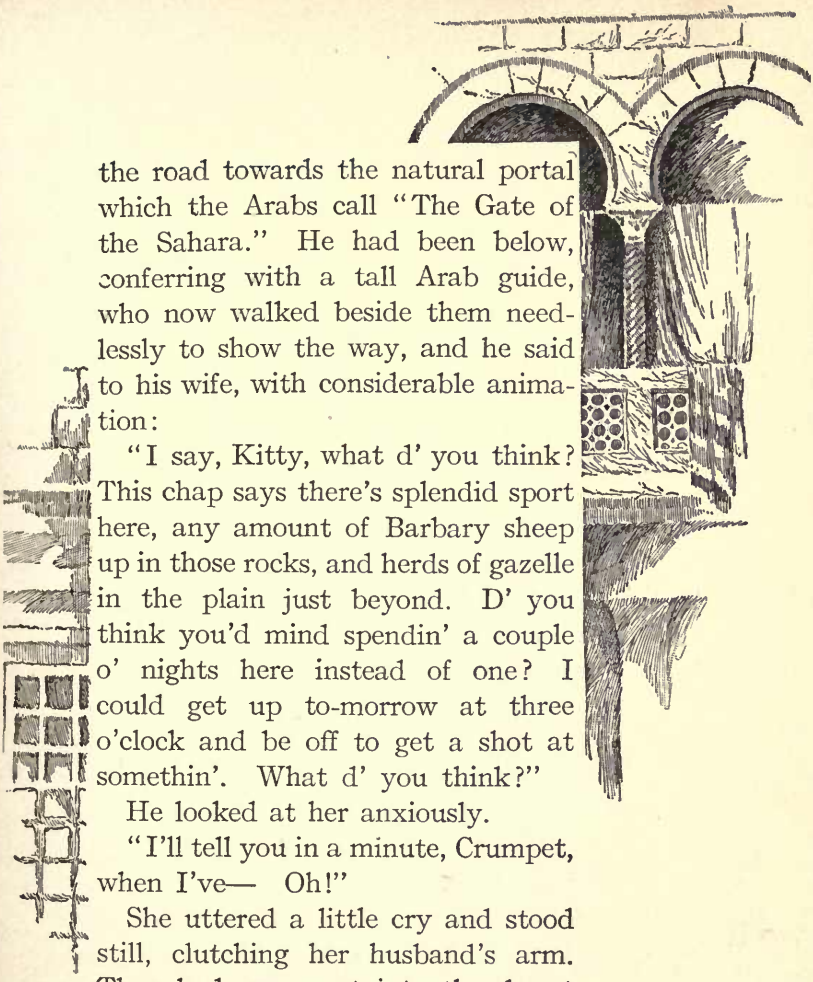


Stupendous battlements of rock reared themselves up round about it towards the clear blue sky. In front of it grew a line of Judas-trees along the white road, which is the caravan route from the Tell to the Sahara. It was small, low, but clean and inviting-looking, with a wide veranda and French windows with green shutters.

"Tea on the veranda!" cried Lady Wyverne. "Tea—tea—and then—where's the desert?"

The landlady, a plump and pleasant Frenchwoman of middle-age and motherly appearance, explained that it lay immediately beyond the wall of rock. Five minutes' walk through the gorge and "Madame" would be there. Lady Wyverne was all excitement. She quite forgot her shaking and fright, and as soon as she had swallowed a cup of tea she made her husband accompany her down





the road towards the natural portal which the Arabs call "The Gate of the Sahara." He had been below, conferring with a tall Arab guide, who now walked beside them needlessly to show the way, and he said to his wife, with considerable animation:

"I say, Kitty, what d' you think? This chap says there's splendid sport here, any amount of Barbary sheep up in those rocks, and herds of gazelle in the plain just beyond. D' you think you'd mind spendin' a couple o' nights here instead of one? I could get up to-morrow at three o'clock and be off to get a shot at somethin'. What d' you think?"

He looked at her anxiously.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Crumpet, when I've— Oh!"

She uttered a little cry and stood still, clutching her husband's arm. They had come out into the desert



and were facing the sunset. Abruptly the world had changed. A glory of color dazzled their eyes. The river, now flowing quietly, wound away into the bosom of an oasis of magnificent palm-trees that lay in a measureless expanse of pale-yellow earth covered with scattered crystals. To the left stretched a distant mountain range, dim purple beneath the rose of the sunset. And from three Arab villages of brown houses scattered among the palms came the cries of children, the barking of dogs, and the faint sounds of African drums and hautboys.

Under a great rock by the riverside sat an Arab boy piping a tune that was like caprice personified in music.

"Oh, Crumpet!" said Lady Wyverne, after a little pause of contemplation, "how strange it is and how —how—"

She caught her breath. There were tears in her eyes.

"Camels! Camels!" she cried. "Look, Crumpet!"

A caravan was winding out of the gorge, a train of laden camels, and barefooted, dark-faced men in fluttering, ragged garments.

"Doosid picturesque," assented Sir Claude. "To get a shot at the sheep you have to—"

"Yes, yes, I know."

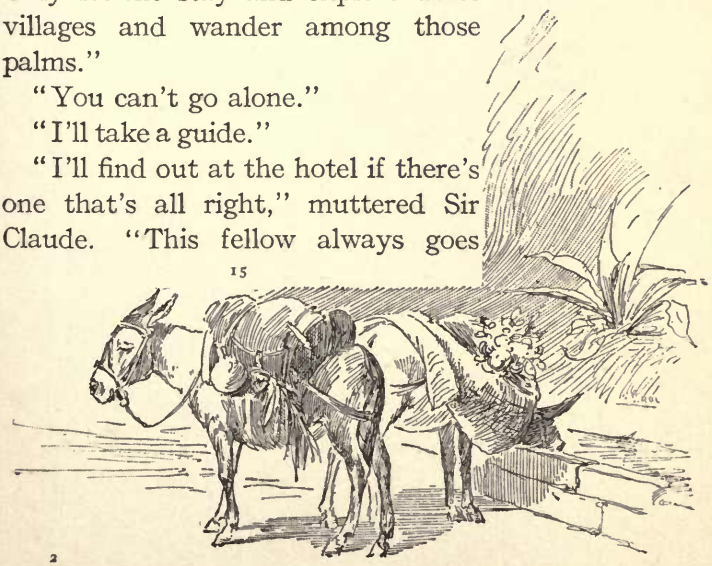
"Well, but how can you—"

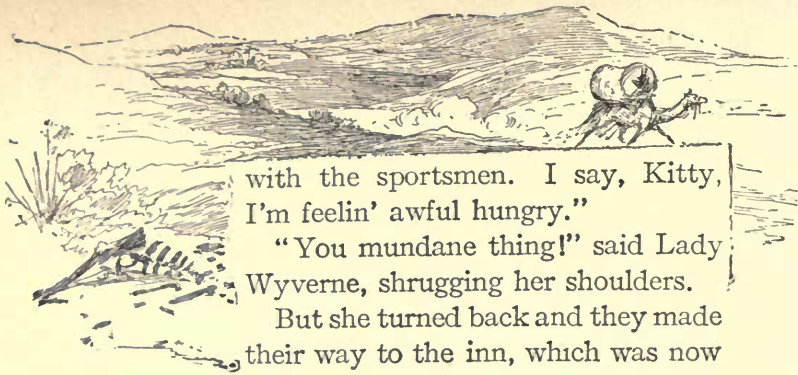
"I tell you I know—I know. We'll stay two nights. Go off to-morrow at three and kill whatever you like. Only let me stay and explore those villages and wander among those palms."

"You can't go alone."

"I'll take a guide."

"I'll find out at the hotel if there's one that's all right," muttered Sir Claude. "This fellow always goes





with the sportsmen. I say, Kitty, I'm feelin' awful hungry."

"You mundane thing!" said Lady Wyverne, shrugging her shoulders.

But she turned back and they made their way to the inn, which was now shrouded in the deep shadows of the rapidly approaching night.

At dinner the only other person in the room was a very smart and handsome young Arab, who, the waiter told them, was an officer in the Spahis, and was stationed at Algiers, but who was now on leave and going to the home of his father, an important Caïd in the Zibans district. Lady Wyverne looked at the guest with interest. He wore a snowy turban and a red jacket, and between the white and red his magnificent black eyes sparkled impudently, and his teeth gleamed as he smiled at the waiter, to whom he addressed a few words in excellent French. His face

was extraordinarily expressive, brilliant, but cruel and startlingly intelligent.

All through dinner Sir Claude was talking about Barbary sheep, and directly dinner was over he said:

"I say, Kitty, s'pose we turn in."

"Turn in!" said Lady Wyverne. "Why, it's only eight o'clock!"

"I know, but you're awfully done up, with that accident and all, and—"

"You mean that you're sleepy and that you've got to be up at three to kill some wretched sheep. Go to bed, Crumpet; but I'm going to stay out on the veranda and look at the moon."

Sir Claude cast a drowsy glance towards the young Spahi, who had just picked up a walnut out of a fruit-dish and was holding it delicately in his slim, almost womanish fingers. The Spahi looked demurely down.

"Well, Kitty, I think I will turn in. You see, if I don't get enough



sleep, there's no knowin' to-morrow whether—"

"You'll hit the wretched sheep or pot your guide. I know. Trot along."

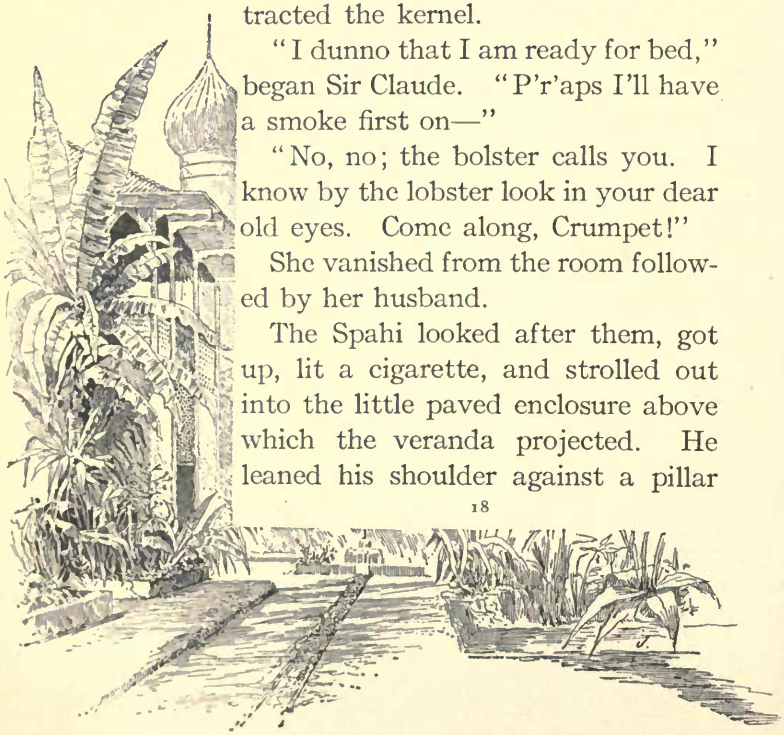
Sir Claude turned to trot. A sharp little sound rang through the room. He looked round. The Spahi had cracked the nut with his fingers, and was smiling gently as he tenderly extracted the kernel.

"I dunno that I am ready for bed," began Sir Claude. "P'r'aps I'll have a smoke first on—"

"No, no; the bolster calls you. I know by the lobster look in your dear old eyes. Come along, Crumpet!"

She vanished from the room followed by her husband.

The Spahi looked after them, got up, lit a cigarette, and strolled out into the little paved enclosure above which the veranda projected. He leaned his shoulder against a pillar

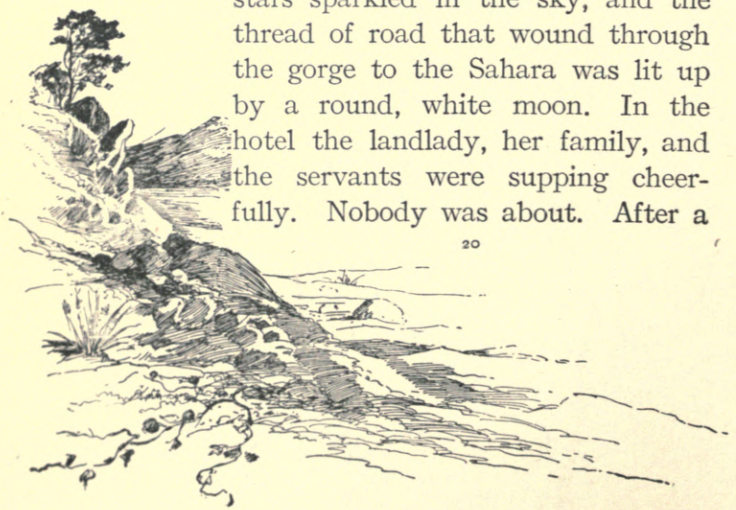


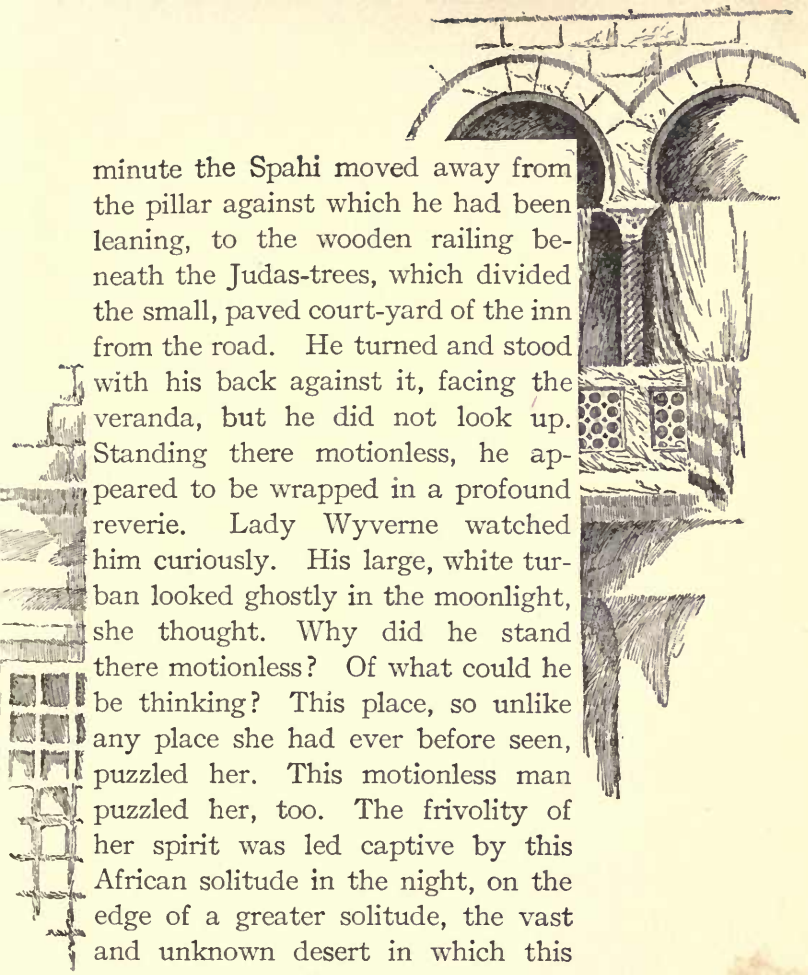
and stood there motionless, staring towards the Judas-trees and the white road that wound away among the shadows of the gorge towards the desert.



III

SIR CLAUDE went to bed, of course. He always did what his wife told him to do. Lady Wyverne tucked him up, and then, followed by the familiar sound of his first snore, went out onto the veranda beneath which the young Spahi was standing. He heard the rustle of her gown above him in the still night, and smiled. Brilliant stars sparkled in the sky, and the thread of road that wound through the gorge to the Sahara was lit up by a round, white moon. In the hotel the landlady, her family, and the servants were supping cheerfully. Nobody was about. After a





minute the Spahi moved away from the pillar against which he had been leaning, to the wooden railing beneath the Judas-trees, which divided the small, paved court-yard of the inn from the road. He turned and stood with his back against it, facing the veranda, but he did not look up. Standing there motionless, he appeared to be wrapped in a profound reverie. Lady Wyverne watched him curiously. His large, white turban looked ghostly in the moonlight, she thought. Why did he stand there motionless? Of what could he be thinking? This place, so unlike any place she had ever before seen, puzzled her. This motionless man puzzled her, too. The frivolity of her spirit was led captive by this African solitude in the night, on the edge of a greater solitude, the vast and unknown desert in which this man who stood like a statue beneath



her had been born and bred, to which he was now returning. A sensation almost of awe crept over her, and she began to wonder. When a woman begins to wonder there is no limit to her mental journeyings. Lady Wyverne had travelled very far when a strange sound startled her and arrested her attention.

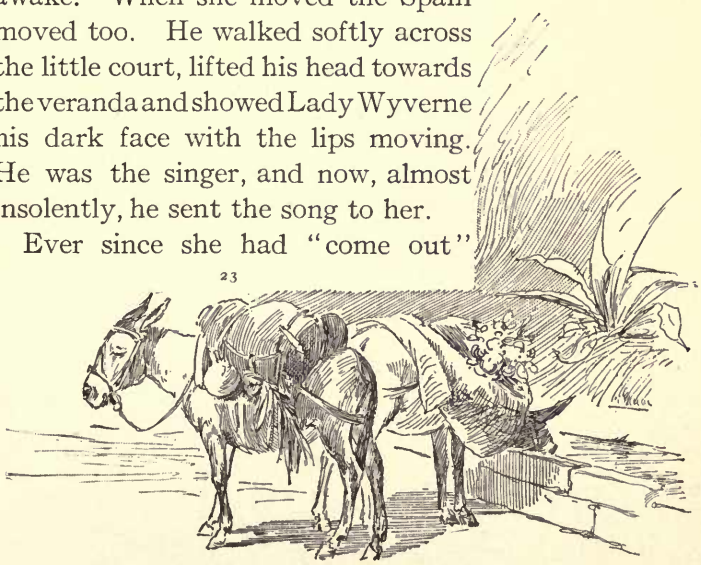
It was a voice singing, or rather murmuring, an uncouth tune, a soft, whining, almost babyish voice. From whom did it come?

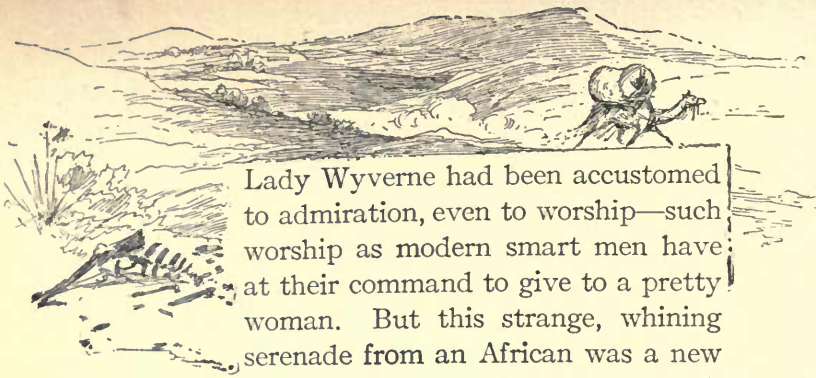
She could see no one except the young Spahi, and it did not occur to her at first that the voice could proceed from a man's mouth. She listened, leaning over the balustrade. The voice went on singing until it seemed to her as if it had become one with the night, almost as if it were the voice of the night in this rocky solitude at the edge of the sands. The tune was ugly, she thought, but

it interested her. Had she spoken of it, she would probably have said that it was "so weird." She had never before heard anything at all resembling it. By degrees the singing began to affect her almost painfully, to play upon her nerves, to make her restless and uneasy. She took her arms from the rail of the veranda. Who was the singer? She tried to locate the sound, and presently it seemed to her that it came from the spot where the Spahi was standing. Was it really he who was singing? Was it a—a serenade?

She smiled. Her swift vanity was awake. When she moved the Spahi moved too. He walked softly across the little court, lifted his head towards the veranda and showed Lady Wyverne his dark face with the lips moving. He was the singer, and now, almost insolently, he sent the song to her.

Ever since she had "come out"





Lady Wyverne had been accustomed to admiration, even to worship—such worship as modern smart men have at their command to give to a pretty woman. But this strange, whining serenade from an African was a new experience. The boldness of the dark face turned upward to her in the moonlight, and the babyish sound of the voice that issued from its lips, formed a combination that stirred her neurotic temperament ever impatient in the search after novelty. Almost ere she realized what she was doing, she had smiled at the Spahi. He stopped singing and smiled up at her. Then he spoke, as if to speak with her were the most natural thing in the world.

"Has madame ever seen the desert under the moon?"

Lady Wyverne started and half drew back. This really was carrying things very far.

"Madame is coming down?" said the Spahi, misinterpreting the movement with a delightful, boyish insolence.

Before she knew that she was speaking, Lady Wyverne had said, in French:

"Certainly not."

"It is a pity. Five minutes and madame could see the desert in the moonlight. There is nothing to fear."

He put his hand down for an instant, then lifted it, and Lady Wyverne saw the moonlight glittering on the polished steel of a revolver. The sparkle fascinated her eyes more than the sparkle of the stars.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

This time she spoke deliberately. The imp, caprice, by which she was always governed, whispered to her:

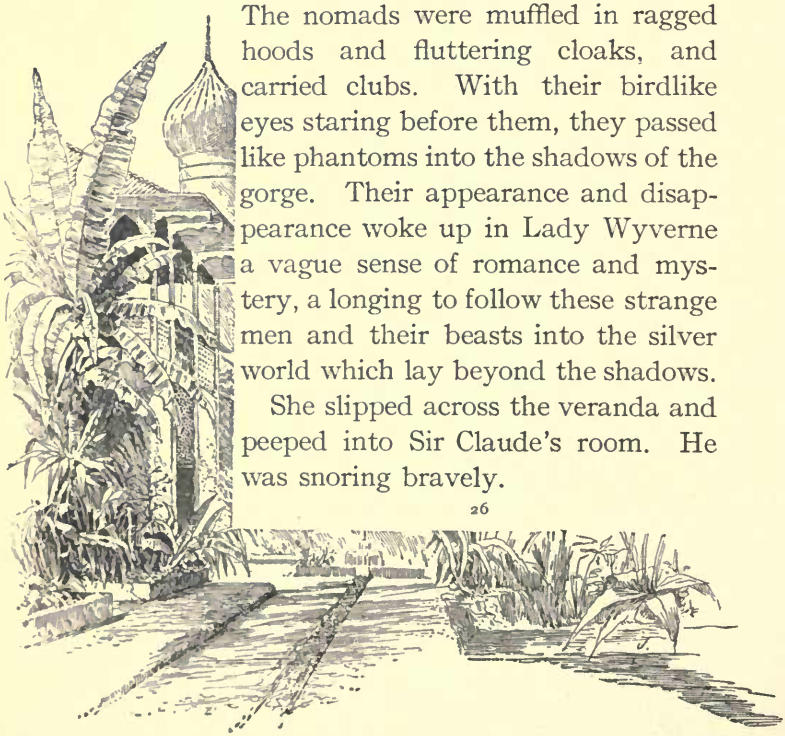
"This is a new bit of fun! Don't be such a fool as to avoid it."



"But madame does not care to see the desert?"

At this moment he noticed that Lady Wyverne's blue eyes had travelled away from his face and were gazing at something behind him. He turned, and saw a train of camels and nomads stealing by the inn on their way to the desert. Noiselessly they padded on the narrow thread of road. The nomads were muffled in ragged hoods and fluttering cloaks, and carried clubs. With their birdlike eyes staring before them, they passed like phantoms into the shadows of the gorge. Their appearance and disappearance woke up in Lady Wyverne a vague sense of romance and mystery, a longing to follow these strange men and their beasts into the silver world which lay beyond the shadows.

She slipped across the veranda and peeped into Sir Claude's room. He was snoring bravely.



"Dreaming of Barbary sheep!" murmured Lady Wyverne. "If only Crumpet were a little bit more—h'm!"

She sighed, caught up a cloak, and went softly down-stairs.

The Spahi met her in the court-yard. The impudence of his demeanor had vanished, and he bowed with a ceremonious gravity which surprised Lady Wyverne, who was unaccustomed to the rapid and complete changes of manner so common among Orientals.

"Will not monsieur come, too?" he asked, simply.

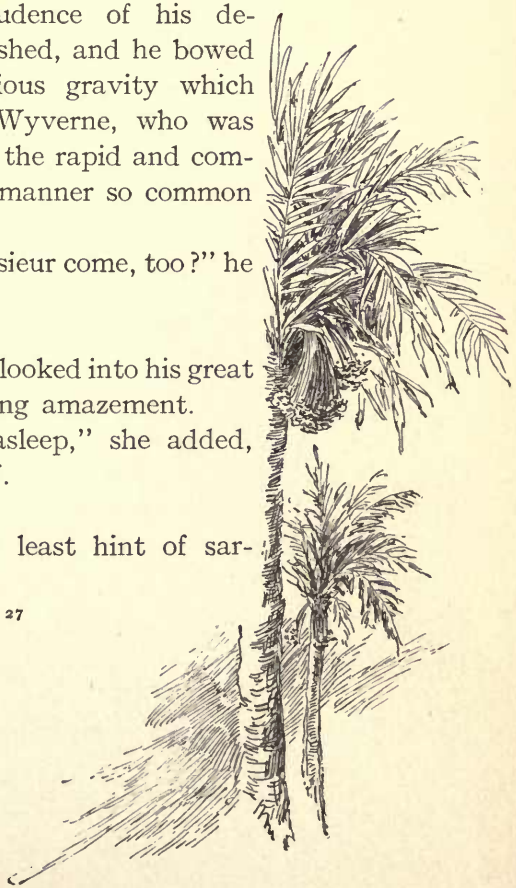
"Monsieur!"

Lady Wyverne looked into his great eyes with a staring amazement.

"Monsieur is asleep," she added, recovering herself.

"So early!"

There was the least hint of sarcasm in his voice.



"He is going after Barbary sheep to-morrow morning at three o'clock," said Lady Wyverne, rather sharply.

The Spahi looked steadily into her pretty, blond face.

"Barbary sheep!" he repeated. "Barbary sheep!"

There was a note of pity in his voice.

"May I put madame's cloak round her?" he added, after a pause.

"I—I'm not going out," said Lady Wyverne.

"But—the cloak?" he said, gravely.

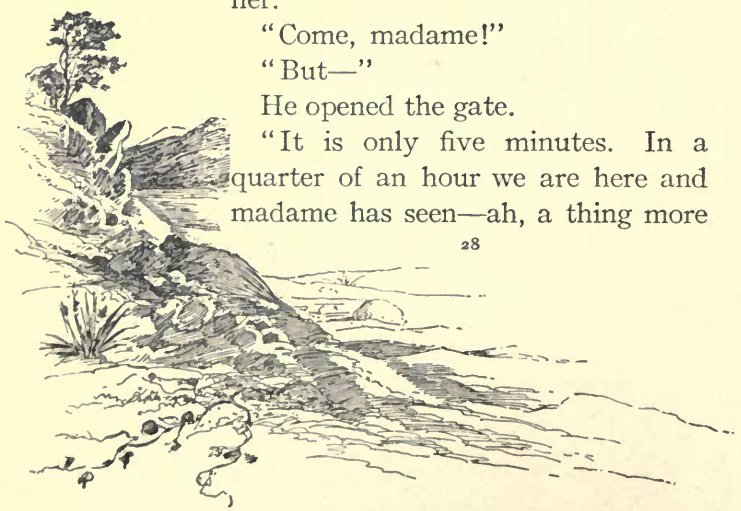
And he took it from her hands and, swiftly and gracefully, with an extraordinary deftness, put it round her.

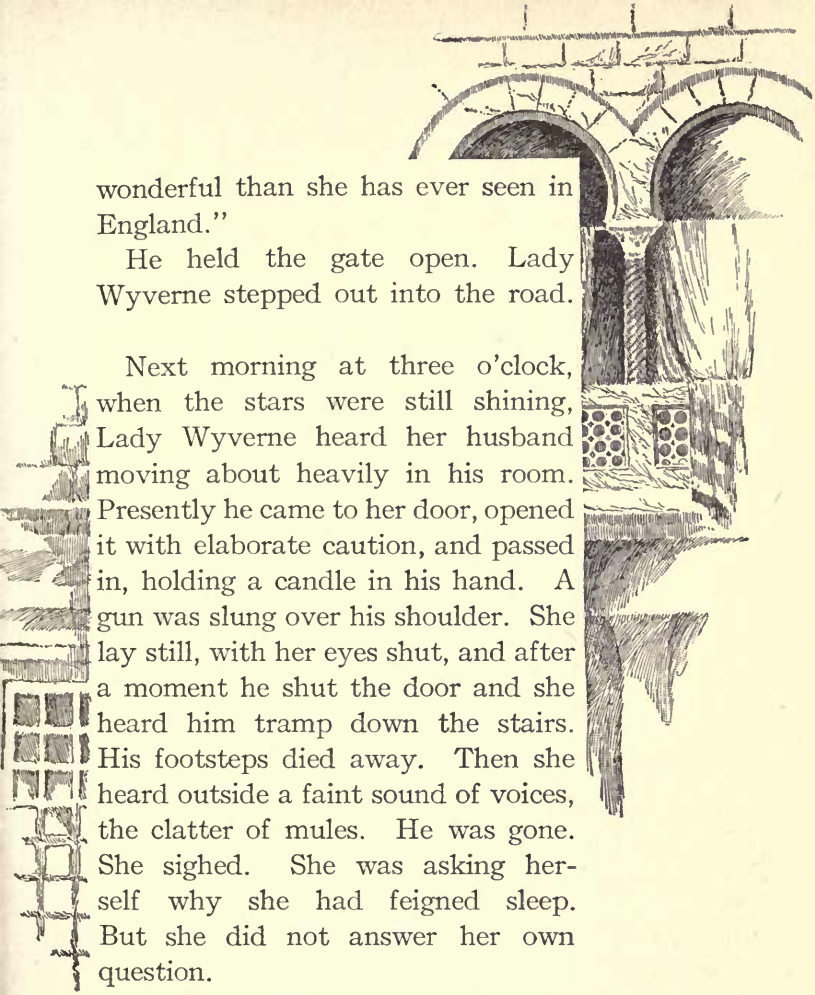
"Come, madame!"

"But—"

He opened the gate.

"It is only five minutes. In a quarter of an hour we are here and madame has seen—ah, a thing more





wonderful than she has ever seen in England."

He held the gate open. Lady Wyverne stepped out into the road.

Next morning at three o'clock, when the stars were still shining, Lady Wyverne heard her husband moving about heavily in his room. Presently he came to her door, opened it with elaborate caution, and passed in, holding a candle in his hand. A gun was slung over his shoulder. She lay still, with her eyes shut, and after a moment he shut the door and she heard him tramp down the stairs. His footsteps died away. Then she heard outside a faint sound of voices, the clatter of mules. He was gone. She sighed. She was asking herself why she had feigned sleep. But she did not answer her own question.

"I hope he'll have luck," she



thought. "I do hope he'll kill some thing."

And then she really slept.

In the afternoon at five o'clock Sir Claude rode up to the inn door in wild spirits. Behind him, slung across a mule, was a dead Barbary sheep.

"Grand sport!" he exclaimed, looking up at his wife, who was on the veranda sitting on a straw chair. "I waited for hours to get a shot, and—I say, Kit, you haven't been borin' yourself to death?"

"No, Crumpet."

"Jolly little place, isn't it? I shouldn't mind spendin' a week here."

"Very well," she answered.

"You don't mind?" he exclaimed.

"I'll do just as you like."

"You are a brick, Kitty! You see, there's gazelle in the plain, too, and—"

"I know, I know."

He pounded up the stairs to kiss her.

"Poor old Crumpet!" she thought.

And she felt as if she were being kissed by a small school-boy.

That evening at dinner they were alone.

"The Spahi chap's gone?" asked Sir Claude, with an indifferent and sleepy glance round.

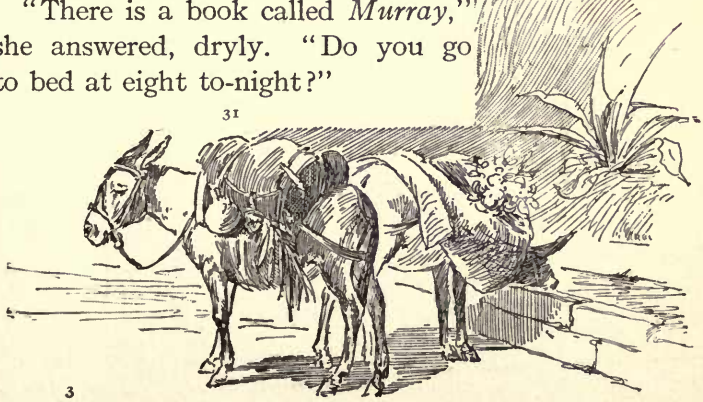
"I don't think so. I saw him about to-day. Perhaps he's got friends in the village and is eating a cous-cous with them."

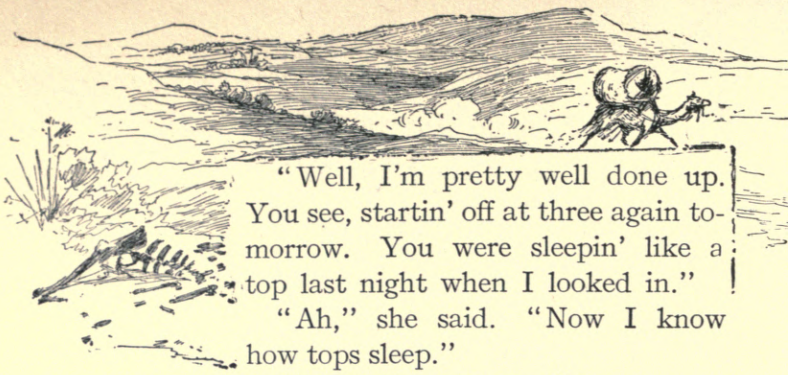
"A what?"

"A cous-cous — a stew — rice, or something, and mutton and spices."

"Jove, Kitty, you are up in all this Arab rot! How the deuce do you pick up such a lot of information about it?"

"There is a book called *Murray*," she answered, dryly. "Do you go to bed at eight to-night?"





"Well, I'm pretty well done up. You see, startin' off at three again to-morrow. You were sleepin' like a top last night when I looked in."

"Ah," she said. "Now I know how tops sleep."

"What d' you mean?"

"Nothing. Go to bed, old boy."

Without much persuasion he obeyed the command. Barbary sheep had made him very tired. He could almost have slept standing like a horse that night.

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IV

"WAS the cous-cous good?" asked Lady Wyverne, half an hour later.

She and the Spahi were walking together slowly down the moonlit road between the towering rocks of the gorge, whose fantastic silhouettes, black beneath the deep-purple sky of night, looked like the silhouettes of the rocks in one of Doré's pictures of the Inferno. The noise of the rushing waters of the river was in their ears and almost drowned the murmur of their voices as they spoke to each other.

"I could not eat, madame."

"Why not?"



"I was thinking of your departure to-morrow, and of mine—far into the Zibans, to the house of my father."

"Absurd!" she said, with a little shrug of her shoulders. "I had an excellent appetite."

He was silent. To-night he wore over his shoulders a great red cloak, which swung gently to and fro as he walked on with the magnificent dignity and pride which is the birthright of the Arab race. She glanced at him sideways, with a birdlike turn of her little head.

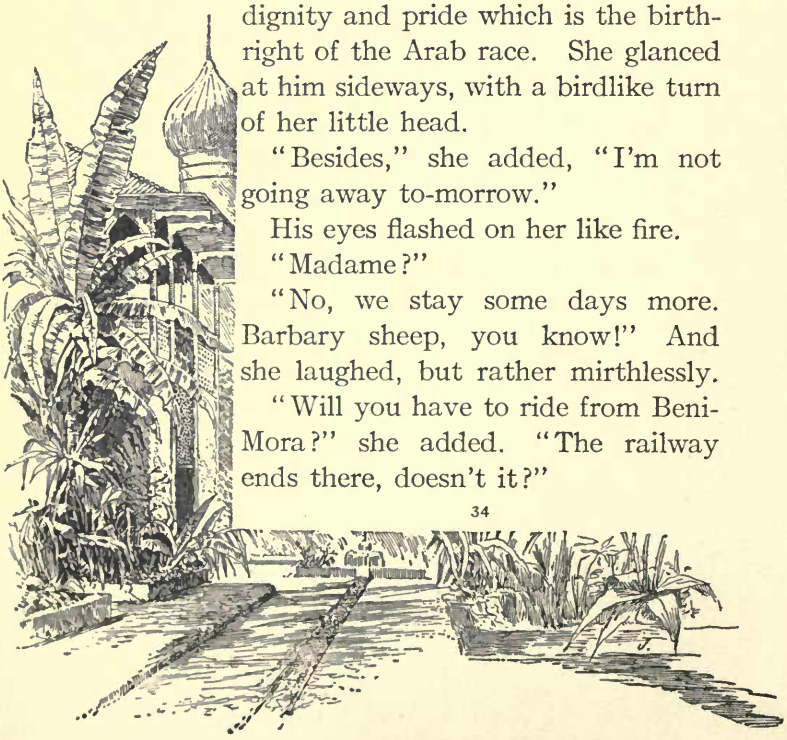
"Besides," she added, "I'm not going away to-morrow."

His eyes flashed on her like fire.

"Madame?"

"No, we stay some days more. Barbary sheep, you know!" And she laughed, but rather mirthlessly.

"Will you have to ride from Beni-Mora?" she added. "The railway ends there, doesn't it?"



"Yes, madame. From there I shall ride."

"How many days?"

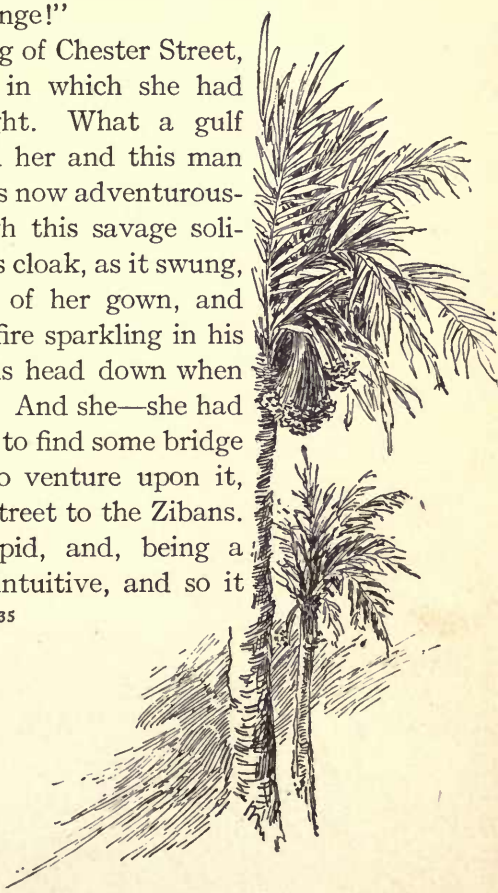
"Three days."

"And always in the desert?"

"Always in the desert."

"And then you will reach your home. How strange!"

She was thinking of Chester Street, Belgrave Square, in which she had first seen the light. What a gulf was fixed between her and this man with whom she was now adventurously walking through this savage solitude! And yet his cloak, as it swung, touched the skirt of her gown, and she could see the fire sparkling in his eyes as he bent his head down when she spoke to him. And she—she had a capricious desire to find some bridge across this gulf, to venture upon it, to bring Chester Street to the Zibans. She was not stupid, and, being a woman, she was intuitive, and so it



never occurred to her even for a moment that the Zibans could ever be brought to Chester Street.

The sound of the river sank to a softer note as its bed widened out, leaving space for the released waters to flow quietly towards the palm-trees of the first oasis. Through the great natural aperture in the wall of rock a vague vision of glimmering spaces showed itself, like a mirage of eternity washed with silver. Lady Wyverne stood still.

"No farther," she said. "This was where we stopped last night."

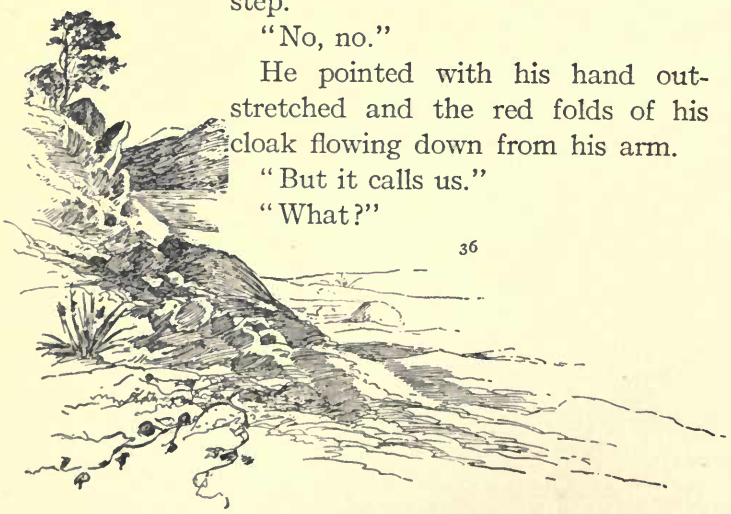
"One step farther to-night, madame!" said the Spahi. "One little step."

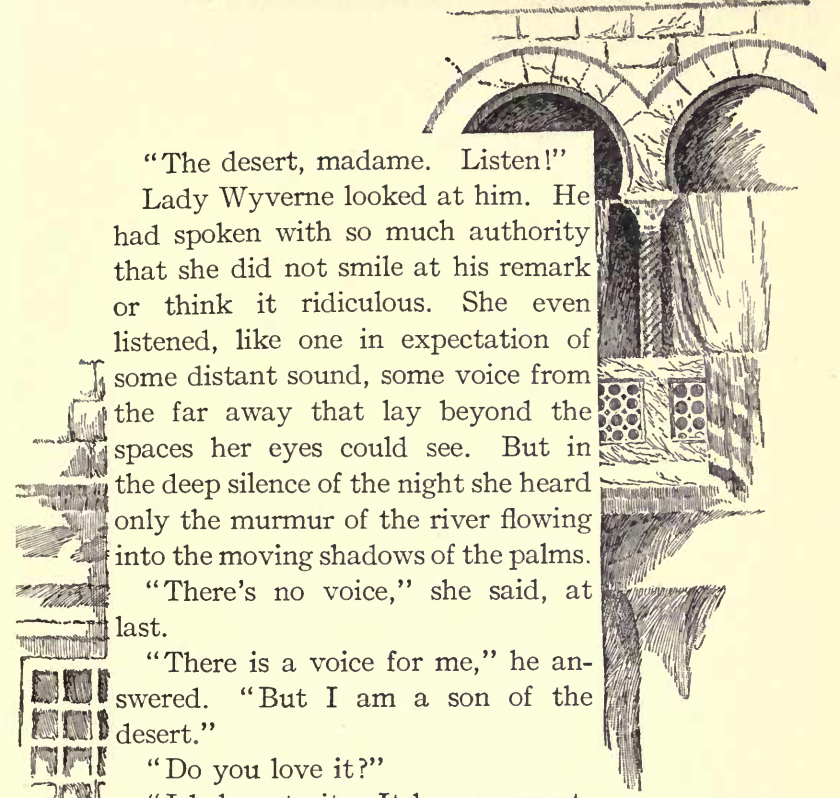
"No, no."

He pointed with his hand outstretched and the red folds of his cloak flowing down from his arm.

"But it calls us."

"What?"





"The desert, madame. Listen!"

Lady Wyverne looked at him. He had spoken with so much authority that she did not smile at his remark or think it ridiculous. She even listened, like one in expectation of some distant sound, some voice from the far away that lay beyond the spaces her eyes could see. But in the deep silence of the night she heard only the murmur of the river flowing into the moving shadows of the palms.

"There's no voice," she said, at last.

"There is a voice for me," he answered. "But I am a son of the desert."

"Do you love it?"

"I belong to it. It has no secrets from me. I have learned all its lessons."

"Could I learn them?"

She spoke with a sort of modesty very unusual in her.



"Only with one who belongs to the desert."

"Then I shall never learn them," she said, with a sort of half-childish regret.

"Why not?"

"Why not? What an absurd question!"

"One can learn what one chooses to learn. I"— he spoke proudly— "I have learned to be a French officer."

"I really don't feel equal to learning to be an Arab woman," she rejoined, rather petulantly. "Besides, you know as well as I do that men can do a thousand things women can't do."

"Even a woman can go a step farther," he said.

"Oh — well — that's not very important. I don't mind."

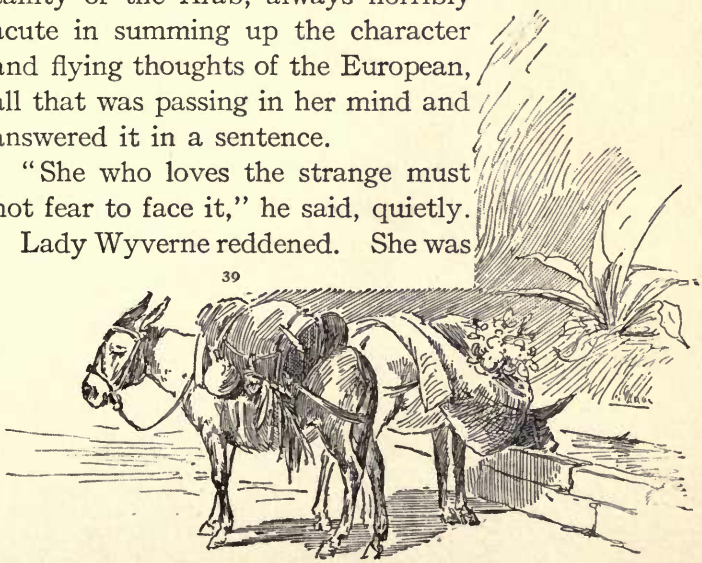
And she walked on.

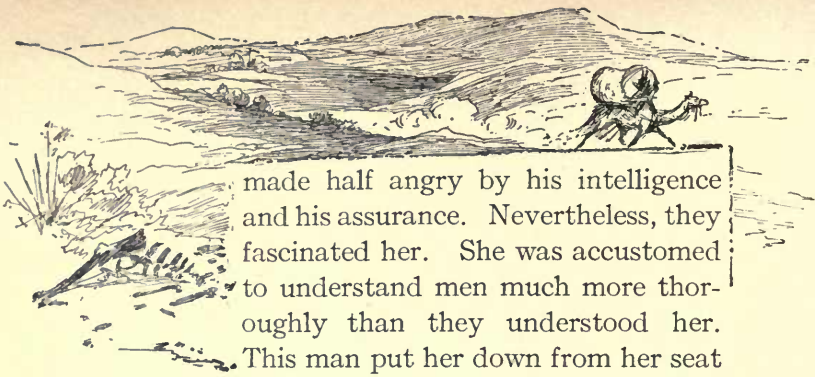
He smiled as he followed her.

When they came out of the gorge they were in the full flood of the moonlight. The change from the confined space of the gorge to this immensity of the desert was startling, and a sudden sense of loneliness and danger rushed upon Lady Wyverne. Abruptly she realized that this caprice of hers, besides being extremely unconventional, might be something more. She thought of "Crumpet" snoring peacefully in the hotel, and for the first time wished that she had not left his side. The Spahi, watching her face in the bright moonlight, read with the swift certainty of the Arab, always horribly acute in summing up the character and flying thoughts of the European, all that was passing in her mind and answered it in a sentence.

"She who loves the strange must not fear to face it," he said, quietly.

Lady Wyverne reddened. She was





made half angry by his intelligence and his assurance. Nevertheless, they fascinated her. She was accustomed to understand men much more thoroughly than they understood her. This man put her down from her seat of the mighty and calmly sank into it himself. He puzzled her immensely, but she felt certain that she did not puzzle him at all.

"I am not afraid of anything," she said. "You don't understand me."

She stopped in the road.

"One may choose not to do a thing without being afraid of doing it."

"But if it is a thing one longs to do, madame?"

He moved on a step, then looked back at Lady Wyverne as if summoning her. She stood firm, and he stopped with serene resignation.

"What on earth are we talking about?" she said, shrugging her little shoulders perversely.

"Your step farther."

"I have taken it. And now I'm going back."

"And to-morrow?"

"To-morrow you will not be here."

"But—if I, too, should be tempted to remain? Barbary sheep, you know, madame, Barbary sheep!"

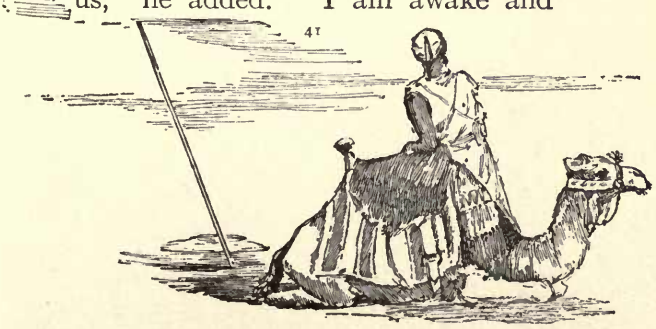
He laughed softly.

"To-morrow I shall go to bed at half-past eight," replied Lady Wyverne, with an air of virtue that was too violent to be quite convincing. "The atmosphere of the desert tires me."

"And to me it gives life."

He was so close to her that she felt the warmth of his great red cloak, and smelt the faint odor of some strange Oriental perfume that clung to his garments.

"That is the difference between us," he added. "I am awake and



alive. You are dozing. And he—he is fast asleep."

"He—who?" she said, startled by his tone.

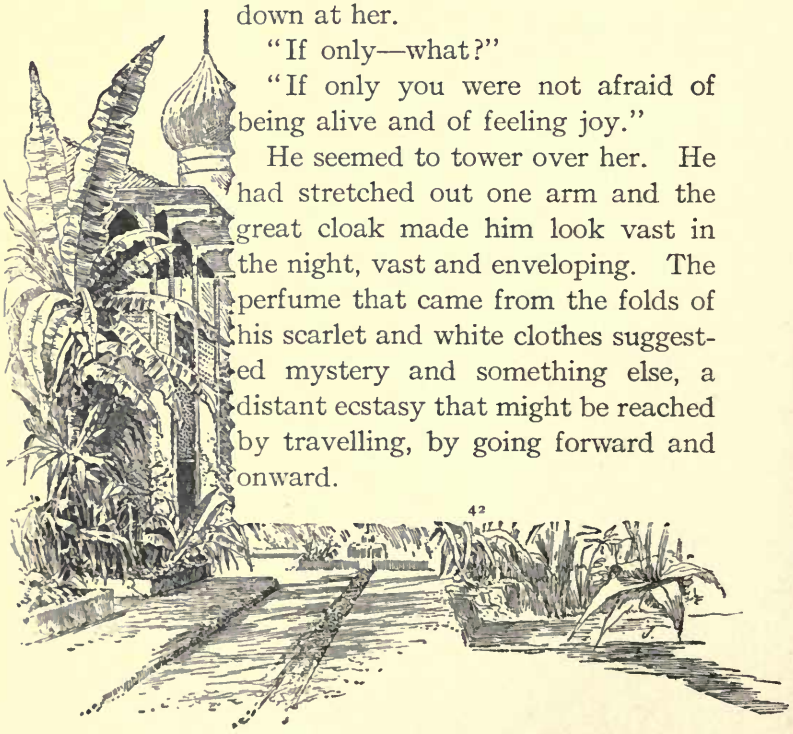
"Milord, your husband. But though you are dozing, you are not asleep. You could be awake as I am awake. You could be alive as I am alive, if only—"

He stopped speaking and looked down at her.

"If only—what?"

"If only you were not afraid of being alive and of feeling joy."

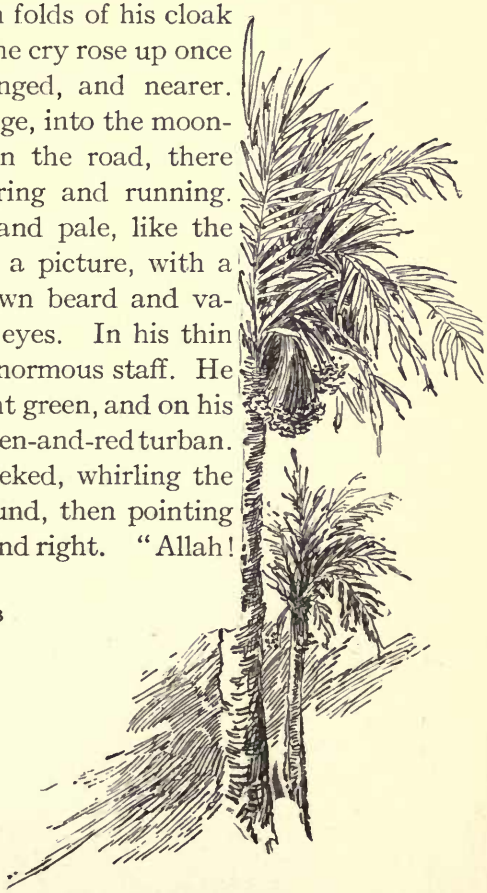
He seemed to tower over her. He had stretched out one arm and the great cloak made him look vast in the night, vast and enveloping. The perfume that came from the folds of his scarlet and white clothes suggested mystery and something else, a distant ecstasy that might be reached by travelling, by going forward and onward.



"For you are afraid," he said. "You are very much afraid."

At that moment there was a shrill cry in the darkness of the gorge, a cry that sounded half human, half animal. Lady Wyverne started and instinctively clung to the Spahi's arm. Instantly the warm folds of his cloak were round her. The cry rose up once more, shrill, prolonged, and nearer. Then out of the gorge, into the moonlight that lay upon the road, there came a man capering and running. His face was fair and pale, like the face of a Christ in a picture, with a curling, yellow-brown beard and vacant, restless, blue eyes. In his thin hands he held an enormous staff. He was dressed in bright green, and on his head there was a green-and-red turban.

"Allah!" he shrieked, whirling the staff round and round, then pointing it suddenly to left and right. "Allah! Allah! Al—"



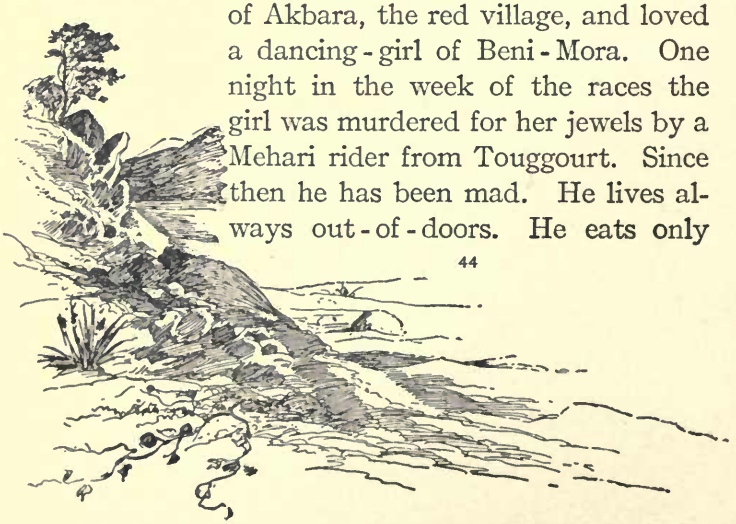
Lady Wyverne cowered against the Spahi. To her strung-up imagination it seemed as if the gorge had suddenly let loose a crazy Messiah to point at her a finger of condemnation. She trembled as the strange figure stopped before her, as its shrill cry died away in a childish whimper, and its large, pale eyes rested upon hers in a glance of dull amazement.

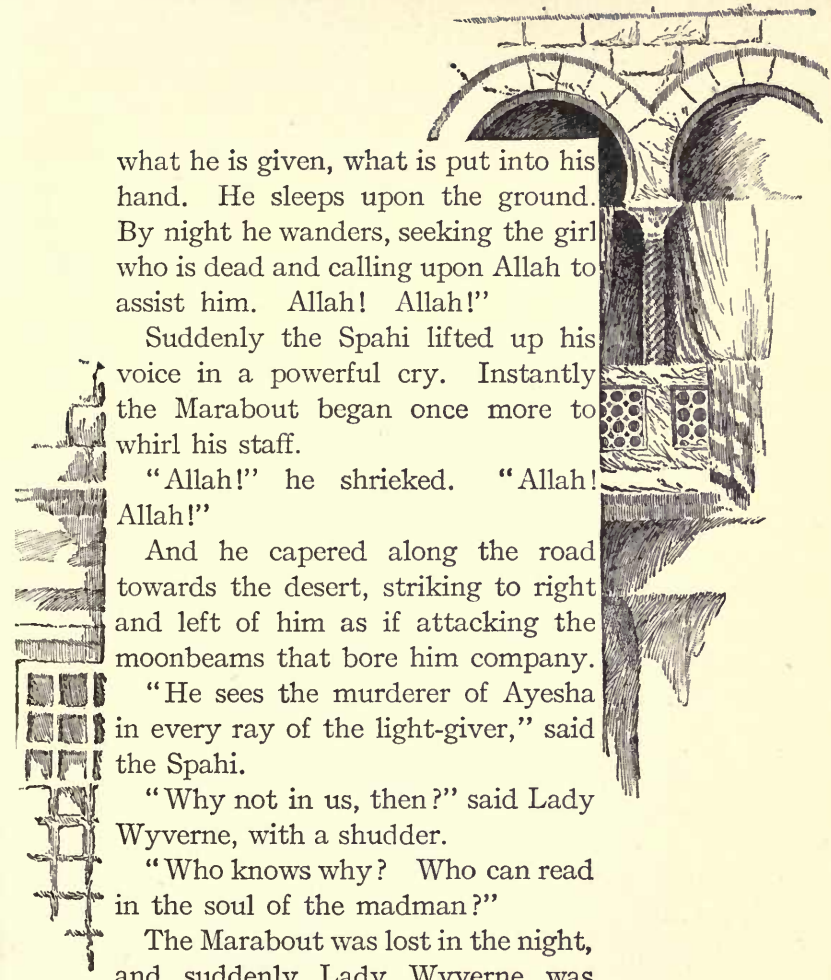
"What is—?" she began, stammering.

"It is only the mad Marabout," said the Spahi, keeping his arm round her protectively.

"The mad Marabout?"

"He was a rich man of the village of Akbara, the red village, and loved a dancing-girl of Beni-Mora. One night in the week of the races the girl was murdered for her jewels by a Mehari rider from Touggourt. Since then he has been mad. He lives always out-of-doors. He eats only





what he is given, what is put into his hand. He sleeps upon the ground. By night he wanders, seeking the girl who is dead and calling upon Allah to assist him. Allah! Allah!"

Suddenly the Spahi lifted up his voice in a powerful cry. Instantly the Marabout began once more to whirl his staff.

"Allah!" he shrieked. "Allah! Allah!"

And he capered along the road towards the desert, striking to right and left of him as if attacking the moonbeams that bore him company.

"He sees the murderer of Ayesha in every ray of the light-giver," said the Spahi.

"Why not in us, then?" said Lady Wyverne, with a shudder.

"Who knows why? Who can read in the soul of the madman?"

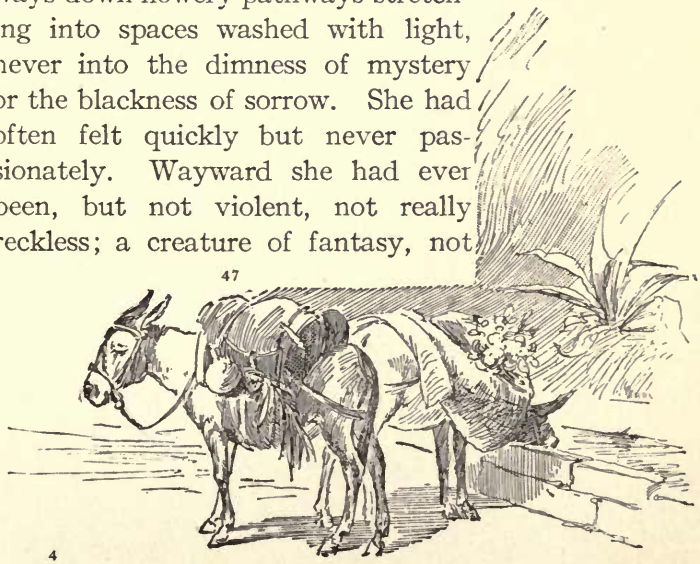
The Marabout was lost in the night, and suddenly Lady Wyverne was

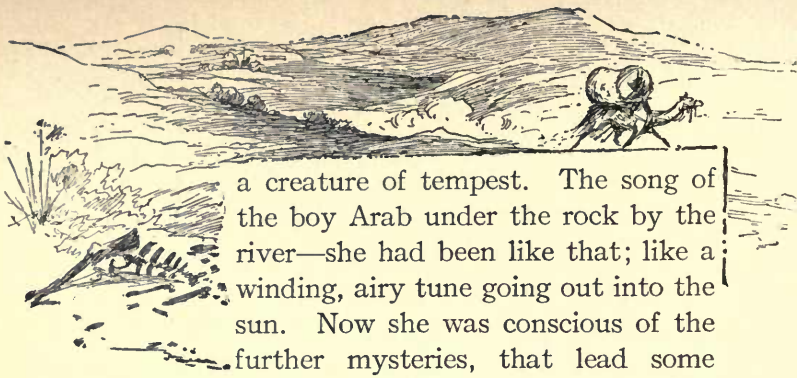


aware of the arm enclosing her. She moved quickly and it fell from about her. But as she walked on she still seemed to feel it, as one who has been touched by a powerful hypnotist seems to feel the magnetic hand long after it has been removed.

V

THAT night, as Lady Wyverne lay awake, listening to the sound of the river passing through the gorge on its way to the Sahara, she was troubled as she had never been troubled before. Her light — not wicked — and fashionable life had always hitherto been governed by caprice, but caprice had led her always down flowery pathways stretching into spaces washed with light, never into the dimness of mystery or the blackness of sorrow. She had often felt quickly but never passionately. Wayward she had ever been, but not violent, not really reckless; a creature of fantasy, not





a creature of tempest. The song of the boy Arab under the rock by the river—she had been like that; like a winding, airy tune going out into the sun. Now she was conscious of the further mysteries, that lead some women on to deeds that strike like hammers upon the smooth complacencies of society, she was aware of the beckoning finger that pilots the eager soul whither it should not go, among the great wastes where emotion broods and wonder is alive.

For the first time in her well-filled life she was very consciously in want.

She had been fond of change, yes, but of such consecrated change; the change from Mayfair to Monte Carlo, or from the Scotch moors to the Rue de la Paix. Now, suddenly, this life seemed to her as unreal as a harlequinade in which she had been playing Columbine, and something within her desired a violently different life.

That she could have it was impossible. Therefore she was unhappy. It was a new experience to her to be confronted by that word — impossible. It seemed to insult her. All the flower of her careless contentment with herself, and her life, and the little kingdom she had ruled, shrivelled up. She was the child crying for the moon.

But she was a child who had been offered the moon, who would be offered the moon again. Where, then, was the impossibility she brooded over? It was created by herself and existed within herself. The soul's "I could never do that!" was the fiat that expressed it.

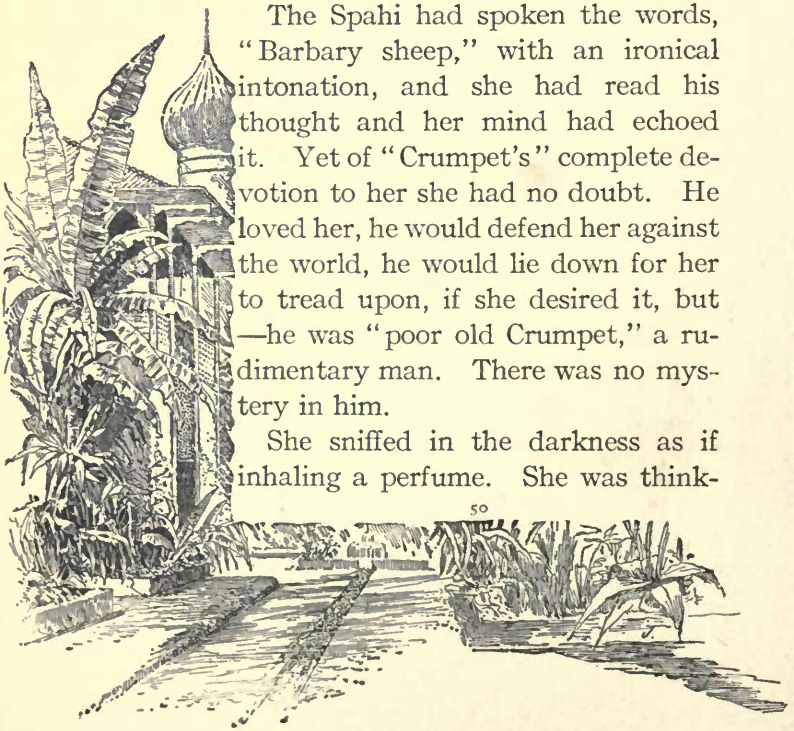
With the sound of the river seemed to come to her faintly the cry of the mad Marabout seeking the murdered dancing-girl in the moonbeams. It was a cry from the savage world on the threshold of which she stood.



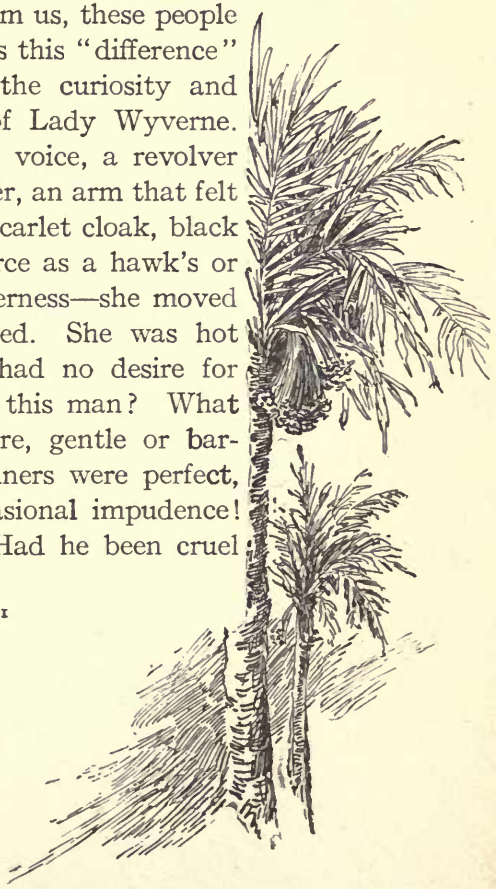
The man in the scarlet cloak and the man in the bright-green robe were the two salient figures in it for her, the one protecting her, the other coming as if to assail her, then falling listlessly from his apparent purpose and capering away intent upon his crazy quest. To-night these two figures seemed more real to her, more vital, than the figure of her husband.

The Spahi had spoken the words, "Barbary sheep," with an ironical intonation, and she had read his thought and her mind had echoed it. Yet of "Crumpet's" complete devotion to her she had no doubt. He loved her, he would defend her against the world, he would lie down for her to tread upon, if she desired it, but —he was "poor old Crumpet," a rudimentary man. There was no mystery in him.

She sniffed in the darkness as if inhaling a perfume. She was think-



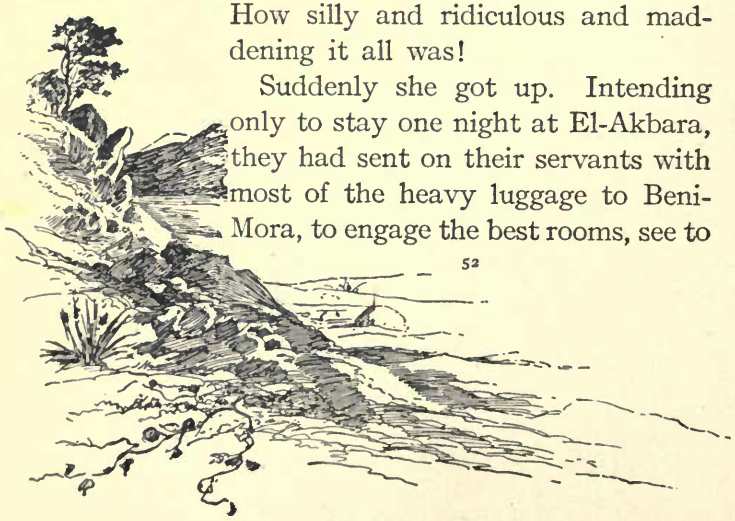
ing of the perfume that clung about the folds of the Spahi's cloak. It was like a part of him and of the land he dwelled in. She would have thought effeminate a scented Western man. But this, and many another thing, is readily forgiven to an Oriental. They are "different" from us, these people of the sun. It was this "difference" that had stirred the curiosity and something more of Lady Wyverne. Scent and a baby voice, a revolver ready to protect her, an arm that felt like iron under a scarlet cloak, black eyes that were fierce as a hawk's or velvety with tenderness—she moved uneasily in her bed. She was hot and restless and had no desire for sleep. What was this man? What was his real nature, gentle or barbarous? His manners were perfect, even in their occasional impudence! And his heart? Had he been cruel to women?

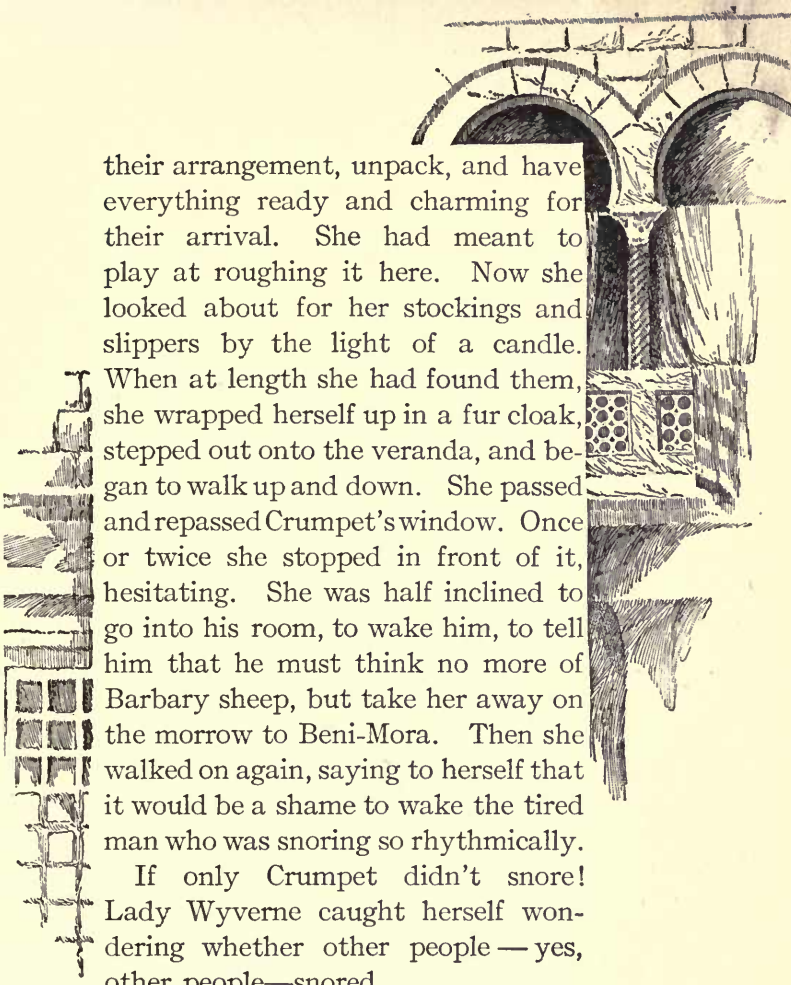


She had known all about Crumpet after talking to him for half an hour. She had even read him at a glance, divined exactly his tastes, realized his foibles, summed up his faults and his virtues, "placed" him, in fact. England breeds such men all the time to follow her traditions, to live and to die British to the bone. Crumpet was a thorough Englishman, a right-down good-fellow, to be trusted at sight. Well, she had trusted him and married him. And ever since then she had had a good time. And her one aim in life had been just that —to have a good time.

And now? What did she want? How silly and ridiculous and maddening it all was!

Suddenly she got up. Intending only to stay one night at El-Akbara, they had sent on their servants with most of the heavy luggage to Beni-Mora, to engage the best rooms, see to





their arrangement, unpack, and have everything ready and charming for their arrival. She had meant to play at roughing it here. Now she looked about for her stockings and slippers by the light of a candle. When at length she had found them, she wrapped herself up in a fur cloak, stepped out onto the veranda, and began to walk up and down. She passed and repassed Crumpet's window. Once or twice she stopped in front of it, hesitating. She was half inclined to go into his room, to wake him, to tell him that he must think no more of Barbary sheep, but take her away on the morrow to Beni-Mora. Then she walked on again, saying to herself that it would be a shame to wake the tired man who was snoring so rhythmically.

If only Crumpet didn't snore! Lady Wyverne caught herself wondering whether other people — yes, other people—snored.



The moon faded, and the thread of the road beyond the Judas-trees lost its silvery hue and looked gray. The air was colder.

"Barbary sheep," Lady Wyverne murmured to herself.

She stopped again by Crumpet's window, and this time she pushed it back and went into his room, treading softly. A faint light, entering behind her, showed her vaguely the bed and the long body stretched upon it. She touched the body with her little hand.

"Crumpet!"

"Er—a-ah!"

The snore was broken, and from the sleeper's mouth came a heavy, sighing exclamation that sounded like a dull protest drowned in a yawn. Lady Wyverne pushed the body.

"Crumpet!"

"A-ah!"

"It's no use. You've got to wake up!"

Sir Claude shifted round, making the bed creak, heaved himself half up, sank back again, opened his eyes, and stared.

"Is it—a-ah!—is it Achmed?"

"No, it isn't Achmed. Wake up!"

"Who the dev—" He put out his hand and felt her hand, her face. "Kitty! What is it? You're not ill?"

"No."

She sat down on a hard chair by his bed.

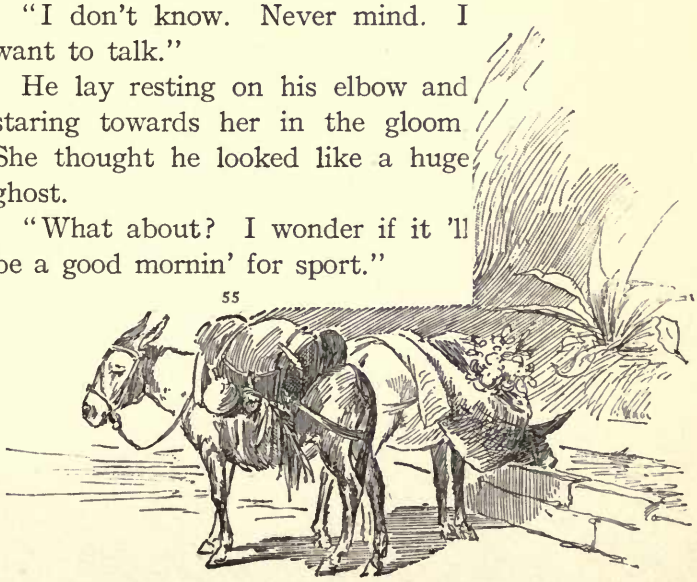
"It's only that I can't sleep."

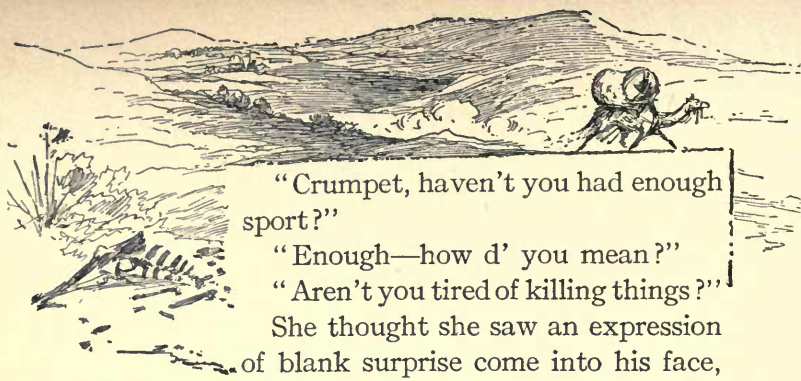
"What's the—a-ah!—what's the time?"

"I don't know. Never mind. I want to talk."

He lay resting on his elbow and staring towards her in the gloom. She thought he looked like a huge ghost.

"What about? I wonder if it 'll be a good mornin' for sport."





"Crumpet, haven't you had enough sport?"

"Enough—how d' you mean?"

"Aren't you tired of killing things?"

She thought she saw an expression of blank surprise come into his face, but she was not quite certain. The gloom prevented her from being certain.

"Tired of killin' things? Why?"

"Wouldn't you rather make things live, things that aren't really alive? Wouldn't you, Crumpet?"

"What d' you mean, Kitty? Make things live! I ain't Providence."

"No, but—"

"Stop a sec—" He laid one hand on her arm. "Isn't that Achmed bringing out the mules? I say, what is the time? We're goin' farther into the mountains to-day."

"Must you go? Must you go so far?"

"Well, Achmed says—"

"I don't want to hear about Achmed. He's a great, ugly, horrid creature."

"Ugly! What's it matter if he's ugly? Why, he's the very deuce for knowin' where the—"

"Don't say Barbary sheep, Crumpet! For mercy's sake, don't say Barbary sheep!"

"Well, but it's Barbary sheep we're goin' after. What's the matter with you, Kitty?"

"I could never explain so that you could understand."

"Ee—ya! Ee—ee—ya!"

There came a cry from below, a stamping of hoofs upon stone. Sir Claude sprang up.

"Jove, it is Achmed! I must get into my togs! I say, Kitty—"

But she had glided away like a shadow and left him.

When he was dressed he came out onto the veranda and found her there,



leaning on the parapet and looking over at Achmed and the mules.

"Do go to bed, Kitty," he said.

"What's the good if I can't sleep?"

"But you generally sleep stunnin'ly."

"I know."

"Don't this place suit you?"

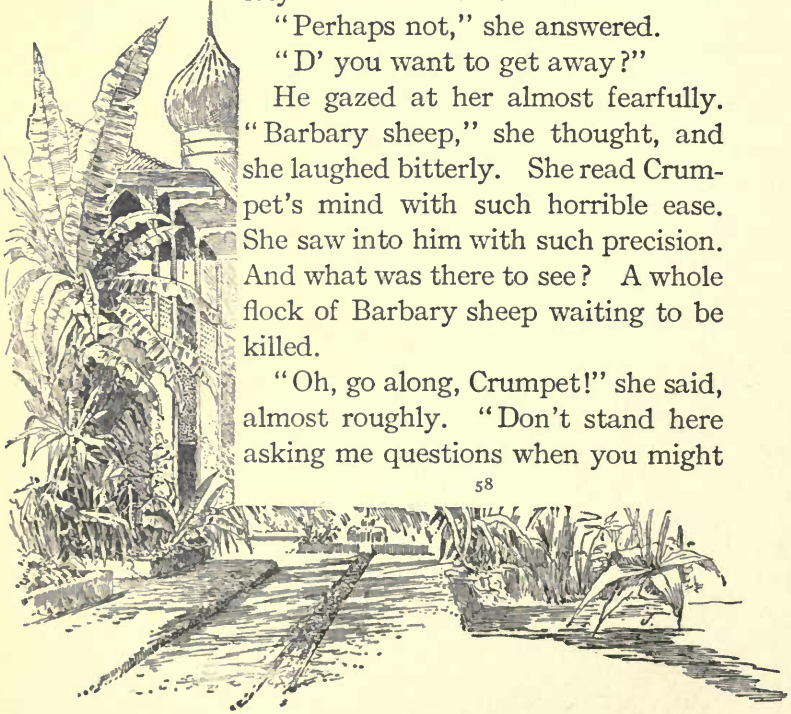
He looked at her with a sudden anxiety, but she felt sure the anxiety was for himself.

"Perhaps not," she answered.

"D' you want to get away?"

He gazed at her almost fearfully. "Barbary sheep," she thought, and she laughed bitterly. She read Crumpet's mind with such horrible ease. She saw into him with such precision. And what was there to see? A whole flock of Barbary sheep waiting to be killed.

"Oh, go along, Crumpet!" she said, almost roughly. "Don't stand here asking me questions when you might



be killing things. Just think of it, Crumpet! Killing poor, innocent, happy things!"

And she laughed again with an irony that startled him.

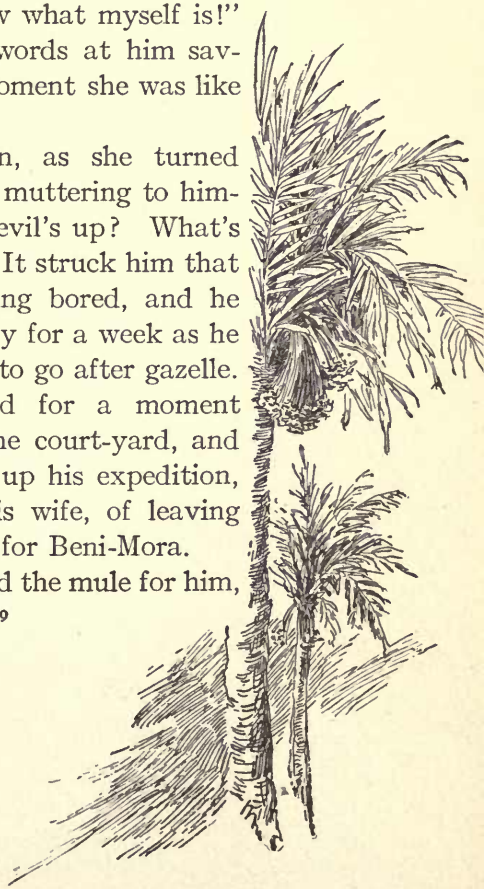
"You ain't well, Kitty," he said. "You ain't yourself."

"As if you knew what myself is!"

She threw the words at him savagely. At that moment she was like a little tigress.

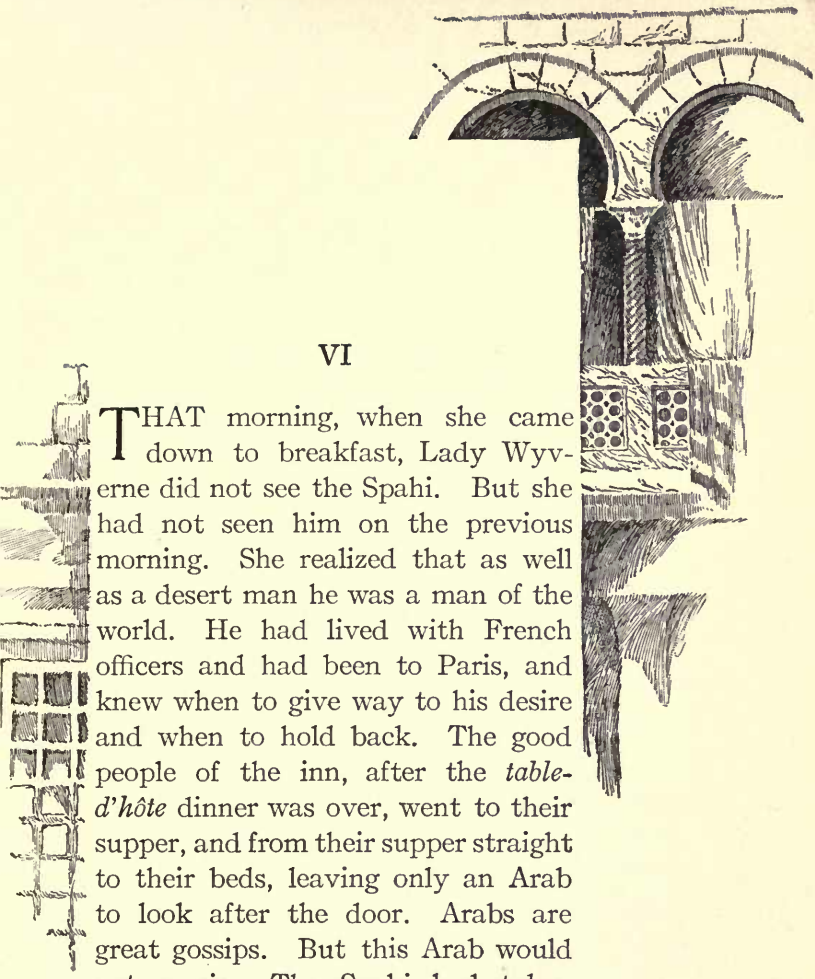
He stared, then, as she turned away, he went off muttering to himself: "What the devil's up? What's come to Kitty?" It struck him that she must be getting bored, and he resolved not to stay for a week as he had intended, not to go after gazelle. He even hesitated for a moment when he was in the court-yard, and thought of giving up his expedition, of returning to his wife, of leaving with her that day for Beni-Mora.

But Achmed held the mule for him,



with huge, black eyes mutely inviting him to mount. And the thought of the cool air on the mountain, the savagery of the rocky wastes, the sunrise over the distant desert, and the prey—the prey that was so difficult to come at—rose in his mind. He had his imagination of the hunter, though Lady Wyverne did not realize it. And it tempted him, it enticed him, as she was tempted and enticed by the Goblin men of Goblin market, who laid their hands upon her sleeve in the empty hours, and whispered, "Come—come where we will lead you!"





VI

THAT morning, when she came down to breakfast, Lady Wyverne did not see the Spahi. But she had not seen him on the previous morning. She realized that as well as a desert man he was a man of the world. He had lived with French officers and had been to Paris, and knew when to give way to his desire and when to hold back. The good people of the inn, after the *table-d'hôte* dinner was over, went to their supper, and from their supper straight to their beds, leaving only an Arab to look after the door. Arabs are great gossips. But this Arab would not gossip. The Spahi had taken



thought for that. But when the sun was up he was away. Lady Wyverne wondered where.

After breakfast she wandered out through the gorge and the gate of the Sahara, accompanied by a guide from the inn, a slim and sleepy youth, who smiled at her and smoked cigarettes and said little. When they came in sight of the river she heard a piping, and there, under the orange-colored rock, sat the Arab boy who played the capricious tune. She stopped for a moment to listen to it. She did not know that she was a being made up of caprice, but there was something in the airy music that appealed to her.

"Is he always there playing?" she asked of the guide.

"Always, madame."

"Doesn't he get sick of it?"

"Madame?"

"Doesn't he get bored always sit-

ting in the same place and doing the same thing?"

"I do not know, madame."

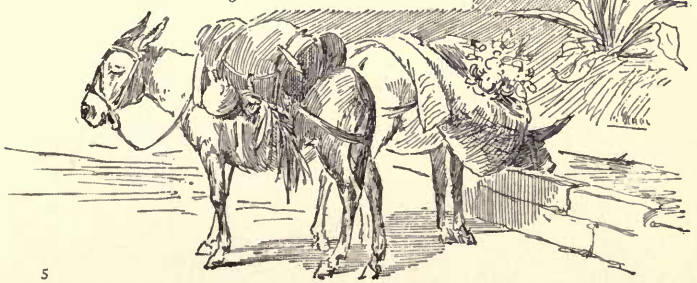
It was evident that the guide had no idea what being bored might mean. Lady Wyverne looked at him almost with envy. The hurry and rush of modern life seemed more than strange here, crazy and vulgar. She wondered whether, if she were to remain in this land, she could catch its dreaming silence, could be moulded by its large simplicity into a simpler woman.

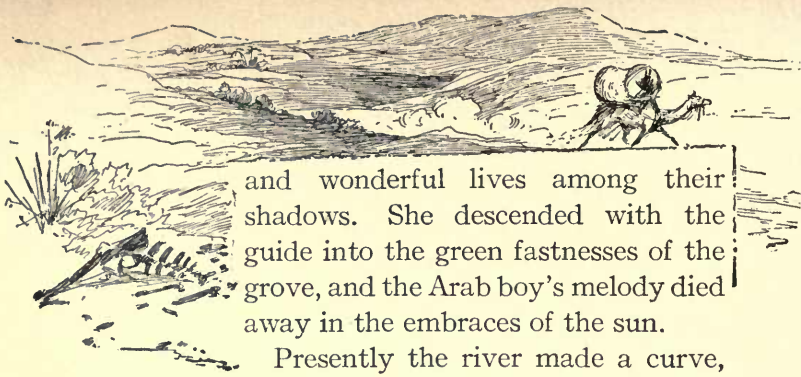
"Shall we go to the red village, madame?"

"Which is it? That one on the hill?"

"Yes, madame."

She nodded. The great palm gardens that fringed the river and nestled round the brown earth houses attracted her, held for her a charm. They looked opulent and mysterious, as if strange beings passed strange





and wonderful lives among their shadows. She descended with the guide into the green fastnesses of the grove, and the Arab boy's melody died away in the embraces of the sun.

Presently the river made a curve, and she perceived that to gain the red village she must cross it. She glanced about for stepping-stones, but could see none.

"How do we get across?" she asked the Arab.

"I shall carry madame. But we must go a little lower down. The water is deep here."

They went on slowly over the uneven brown earth among the wrinkled trunks. Lady Wyverne looked more closely than before at her attendant. He was quite a boy, with small limbs, delicate hands. She looked at the running water.

"You will never be able to carry me," she said.

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"Oh yes, madame. And if you fall you will not be drowned."

She could not help laughing at his nonchalance, but his answer hardly reassured her.

"Is it much farther — the ford, I mean?" she asked.

"Where that apricot-tree leans over the water, madame."

He pointed. As he did so a figure came out from the recesses of the grove and stood quite still beneath the fruit tree.

"There is Benchaâlal!" said the guide.

"Benchaâlal?"

"The Spahi."

Lady Wyverne shaded her eyes with one hand.

"Who is he?" she asked, carelessly.

But she had recognized the companion of her night walks, and her heart beat perceptibly quicker.



"He is at madame's hotel. Madame has seen him."

"Oh, the officer."

"He is terrible. He is the best horseman of the Sahara. With the revolver he can hit any stone I throw up into the air—so!"

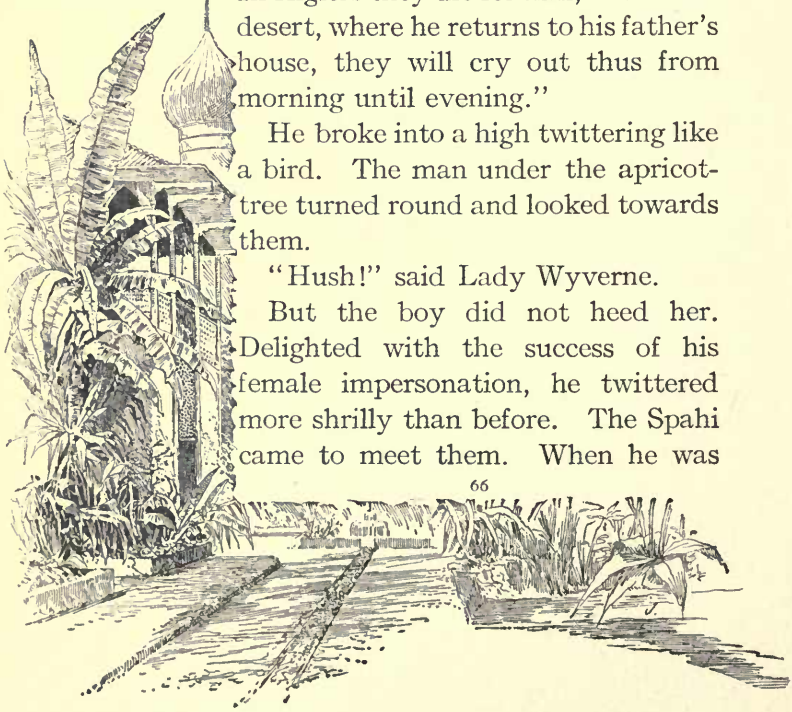
He flung a stone up towards the quivering blue of the sky.

"All women who see him love him. In Algiers they die for him, and in the desert, where he returns to his father's house, they will cry out thus from morning until evening."

He broke into a high twittering like a bird. The man under the apricot-tree turned round and looked towards them.

"Hush!" said Lady Wyverne.

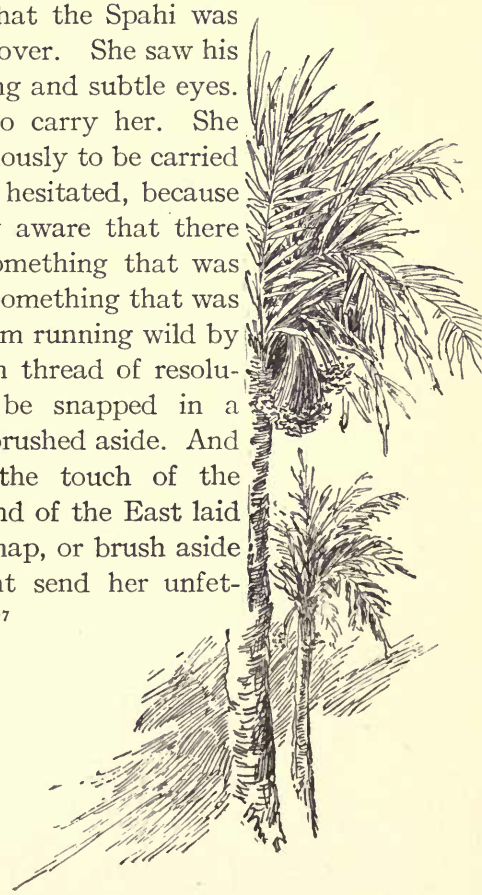
But the boy did not heed her. Delighted with the success of his female impersonation, he twittered more shrilly than before. The Spahi came to meet them. When he was



close to them he lifted his hand to his turban and saluted gravely.

"I believe I have had the honor of seeing madame at the hotel?" he said, almost as if interrogatively. "Madame is going to cross the river?"

Lady Wyverne hesitated. She knew, of course, that the Spahi was going to carry her over. She saw his intention in his long and subtle eyes. She wished him to carry her. She even longed ridiculously to be carried by him. But she hesitated, because she was now fully aware that there was within her something that was more than wilful, something that was only kept back from running wild by —a what? A thin thread of resolution that might be snapped in a moment, or even brushed aside. And she feared that the touch of the Spahi, like the hand of the East laid upon her, might snap, or brush aside that barrier, might send her unfet-



tered, unrestrained, into a terrible world of light.

But while Lady Wyverne hesitated the guide spoke.

"I am going to carry madame across."

The Spahi laughed. His little, even teeth gleamed between his dark lips.

"Madame permits me?"

He took Lady Wyverne up in his arms.

"No!" she said.

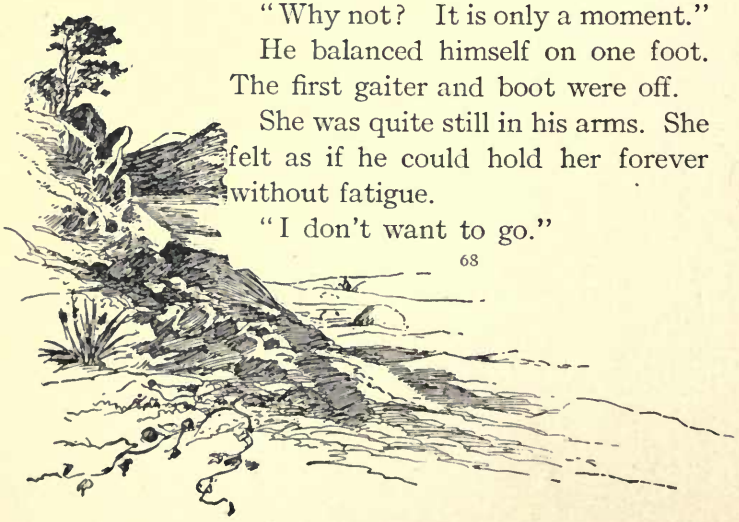
He looked into her face. As he did so he made a secret sign to the guide to pull off his gaiters and boots. The boy bent down to do so, swiftly, deftly.

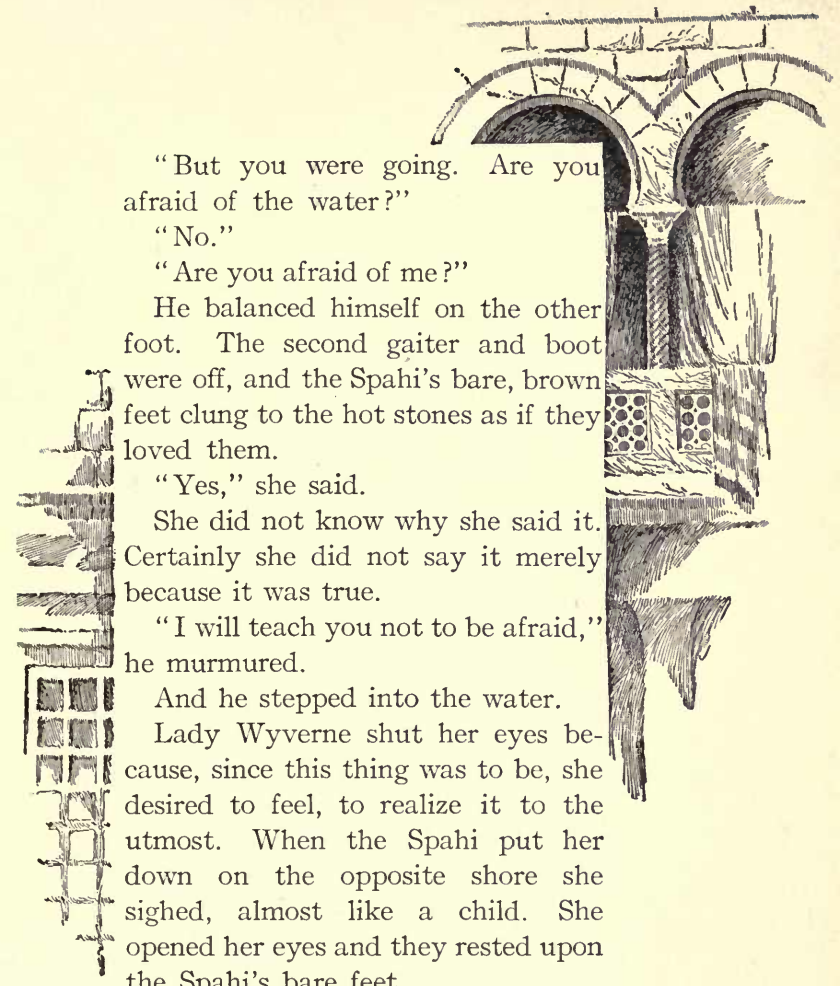
"Why not? It is only a moment."

He balanced himself on one foot. The first gaiter and boot were off.

She was quite still in his arms. She felt as if he could hold her forever without fatigue.

"I don't want to go."





"But you were going. Are you afraid of the water?"

"No."

"Are you afraid of me?"

He balanced himself on the other foot. The second gaiter and boot were off, and the Spahi's bare, brown feet clung to the hot stones as if they loved them.

"Yes," she said.

She did not know why she said it. Certainly she did not say it merely because it was true.

"I will teach you not to be afraid," he murmured.

And he stepped into the water.

Lady Wyverne shut her eyes because, since this thing was to be, she desired to feel, to realize it to the utmost. When the Spahi put her down on the opposite shore she sighed, almost like a child. She opened her eyes and they rested upon the Spahi's bare feet.



The foot of the desert man is as expressive as his hand, and often as fine, as delicate. These feet gave to Lady Wyverne an extraordinary impression of finesse, which almost made her think of herself as clumsy. She contrasted swiftly this vital impression of finesse with the equally vital impression of strength of which she had just been conscious, and she wondered at the extremes that were mingled in this man, at the woman that was surely in him as well as the man and the savage man. Suddenly giving the rein to her impulse, she said:

"Have you your revolver?"

He drew it instantly from the folds of his scented garments.

"Throw up a stone," she said to the guide, who had just come up to them, holding the boots and gaiters of the Spahi in his hand.

The boy went away a few steps,

stood in front of the Spahi, looked at him, bent down and picked up a stone. The Spahi smiled and lifted the hand that held the revolver. He cried out a word in Arabic. The boy flung the stone high into the blue. There was a sharp report, and it fell in splinters and was hidden by the water of the river.

"Crumpet couldn't do that!"

"Madame?"

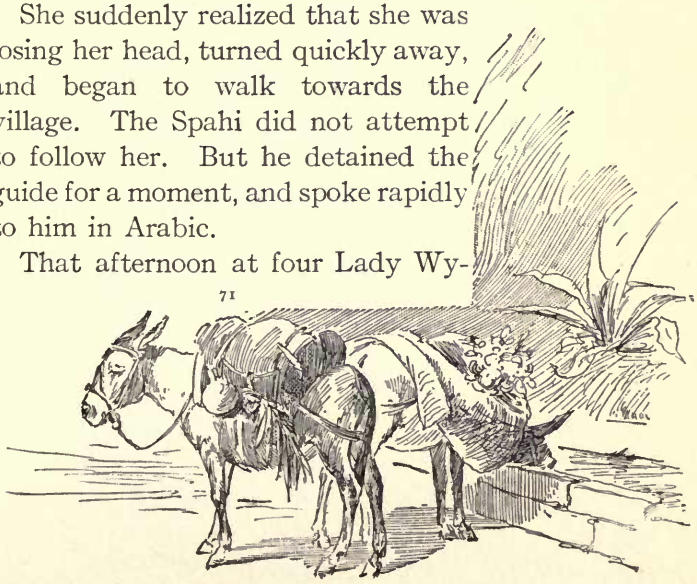
The exclamation had come involuntarily from Lady Wyverne's lips.

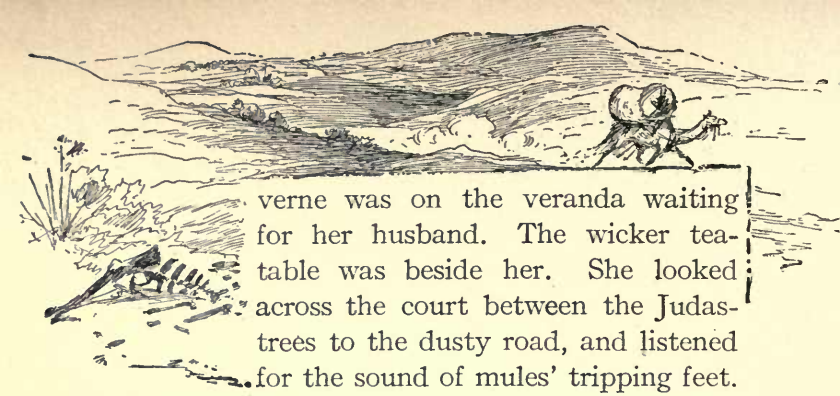
"Crompètes—vous dites?"

"Au revoir, monsieur, and many thanks."

She suddenly realized that she was losing her head, turned quickly away, and began to walk towards the village. The Spahi did not attempt to follow her. But he detained the guide for a moment, and spoke rapidly to him in Arabic.

That afternoon at four Lady Wy-





verne was on the veranda waiting for her husband. The wicker tea-table was beside her. She looked across the court between the Judas-trees to the dusty road, and listened for the sound of mules' tripping feet. But she did not hear them. The time passed on. Crumpet was later than usual. At last she was tired of waiting and called over the balustrade to the Arab below to bring up tea. Just as it was being brought there came along the road an Arab boy with a piece of paper in his hand. He turned in through the gateway, looked up to Lady Wyverne, and held up the paper.

"Is it for me?" she asked.

He nodded. She beckoned to him to come, and in a moment he was beside her and had given her the note. It was from Sir Claude.

"DARLING OLD GIRL, — D' you mind very much if I do not come back to-night?

I've got two sheep this morning, and Achmed says if I stay out and sleep at—some place near a salt mountain with the devil's own name—I can be certain of potting some gazelle at sundown. Back to-morrow without fail, and ready to move on to Beni—what you may call it. Love,

"CRUMPET."

Lady Wyverne gave the boy a coin and sat down alone to tea.

"Why did Providence give me a fool for a husband?"

That was her thought.

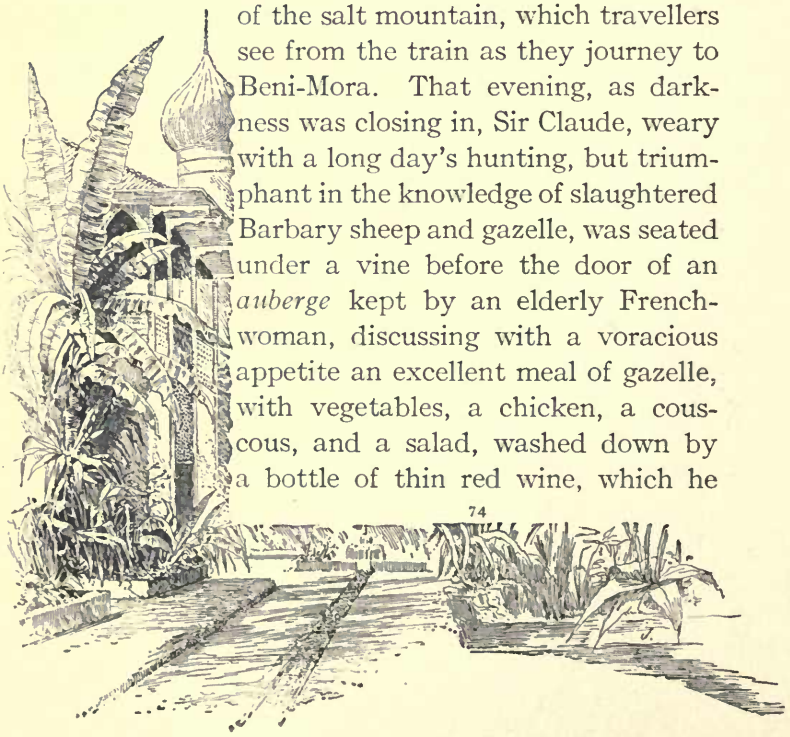
As she sipped her tea she seemed to see the Spahi's brown feet resting on the warm stones by the river. They clung to the stones as sensitively as hands could have clung. She imagined them padding softly over the desert sands.

And a woman's feet trod beside them.

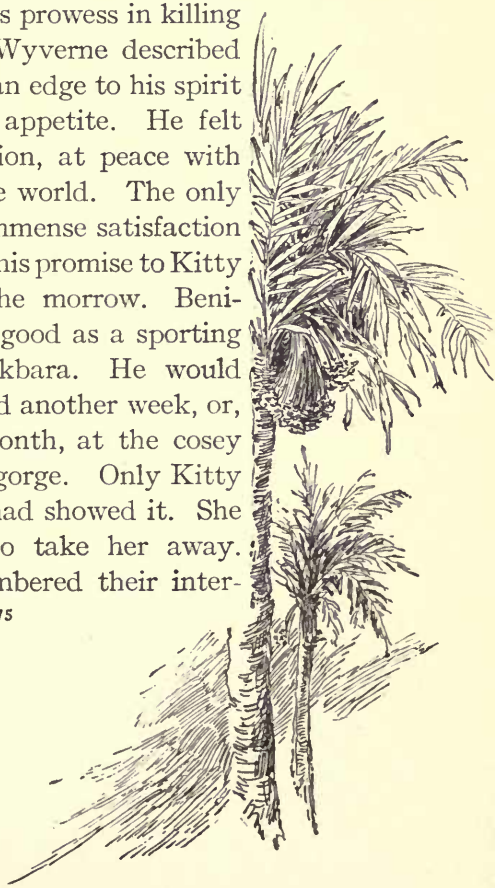


VII

THE place with the devil's own name alluded to by Sir Claude was El-Alia in the plain at the foot of the salt mountain, which travellers see from the train as they journey to Beni-Mora. That evening, as darkness was closing in, Sir Claude, weary with a long day's hunting, but triumphant in the knowledge of slaughtered Barbary sheep and gazelle, was seated under a vine before the door of an *auberge* kept by an elderly Frenchwoman, discussing with a voracious appetite an excellent meal of gazelle, with vegetables, a chicken, a couscous, and a salad, washed down by a bottle of thin red wine, which he



would have despised in London, but which now seemed to him more delicious than a vintage claret drunk under ordinary town circumstances. The two days of out-door life in wild surroundings and glorious air, the contact with Africans, who were mighty hunters, his prowess in killing things—as Lady Wyverne described sport—had given an edge to his spirit as well as to his appetite. He felt in glorious condition, at peace with himself and all the world. The only cloud to dim his immense satisfaction was the thought of his promise to Kitty to go away on the morrow. Beni-Mora was far less good as a sporting centre than El-Akbara. He would have liked to spend another week, or, better, another month, at the cosey little hotel in the gorge. Only Kitty was bored. She had showed it. She had asked him to take her away. Vaguely he remembered their inter-



view in the night. He had been half asleep at first, and afterwards pre-occupied by the thought that Achmed was bringing round the mules. Nevertheless, he remembered Kitty's odd, nervous anxiety, the unusual irony and bitterness of her speech.

"P'r'aps she thinks I'm neglectin' her," he thought, as he refilled his glass. "Women never understand what sport is to a man, unless they shoot themselves. And Kitty hates a gun."

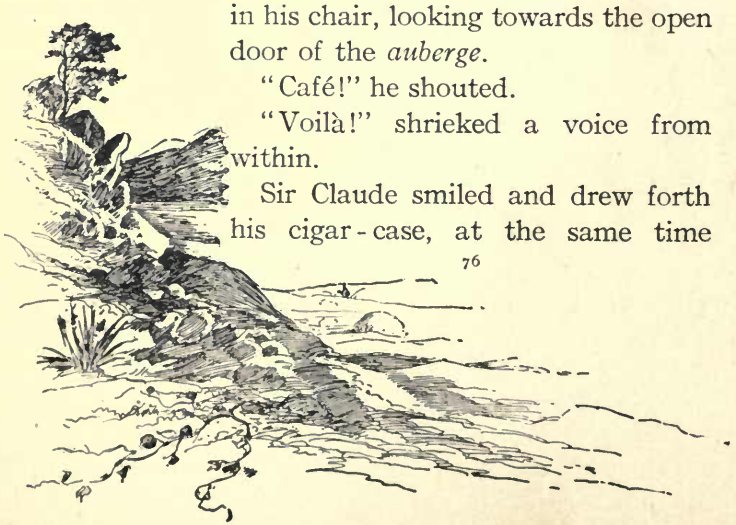
That she liked a revolver he did not know.

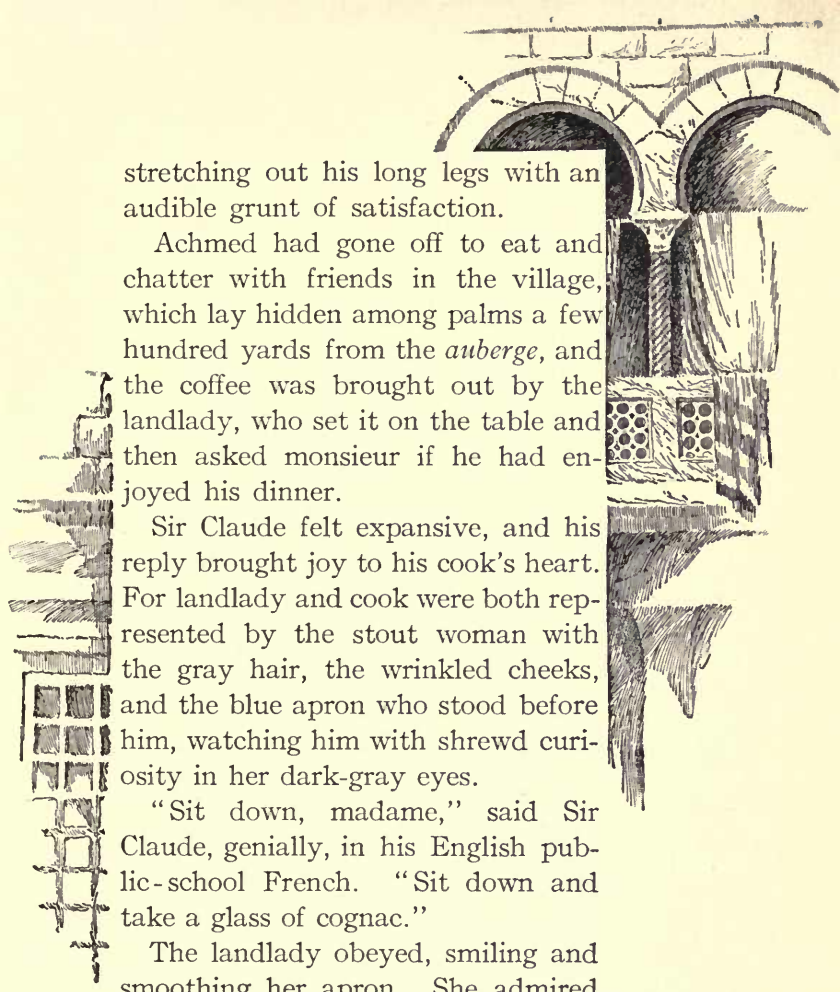
He put down his glass and turned in his chair, looking towards the open door of the *auberge*.

"Café!" he shouted.

"Voilà!" shrieked a voice from within.

Sir Claude smiled and drew forth his cigar-case, at the same time





stretching out his long legs with an audible grunt of satisfaction.

Achmed had gone off to eat and chatter with friends in the village, which lay hidden among palms a few hundred yards from the *auberge*, and the coffee was brought out by the landlady, who set it on the table and then asked monsieur if he had enjoyed his dinner.

Sir Claude felt expansive, and his reply brought joy to his cook's heart. For landlady and cook were both represented by the stout woman with the gray hair, the wrinkled cheeks, and the blue apron who stood before him, watching him with shrewd curiosity in her dark-gray eyes.

"Sit down, madame," said Sir Claude, genially, in his English public-school French. "Sit down and take a glass of cognac."

The landlady obeyed, smiling and smoothing her apron. She admired



a fine man, and she considered Sir Claude an exceedingly handsome specimen of humanity.

"What brought you to this out-of-the-way place?" continued Sir Claude.

The landlady sipped her cognac with an "à votre santé, monsieur!" and proceeded to relate her history, or that part of it which she thought edifying—how she had been born at Marseilles and brought to Algiers by her parents; how she had married a waiter in a café who had taken to drink and at last lived only for absinthe; how they had drifted from one place to another, and finally settled at El-Alia, where he had died three years before.

"And you live alone here among the Arabs?" cried Sir Claude.

"No, m'sieur, I have my nephew Robert. But to-night he is at Beni-Mora. He has gone to buy provi-

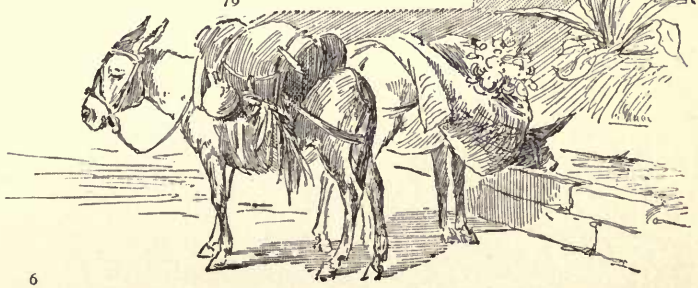
sions. All our tinned food comes from there."

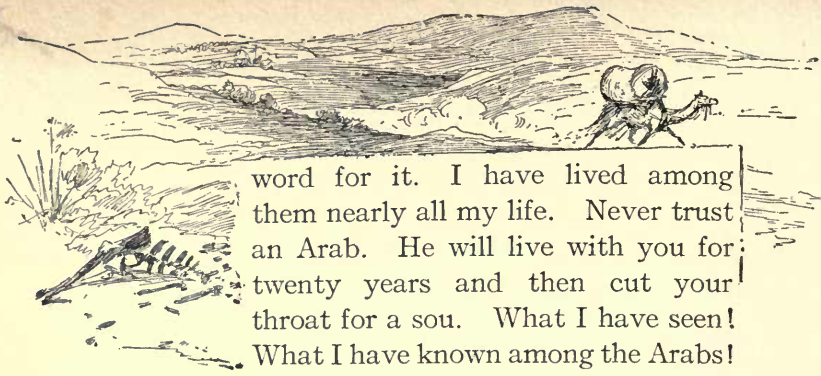
She sipped again with her eyes on Sir Claude. The shadows beneath the vine grew deeper. The pale salt mountain was fading away like a ghost in the night. Over the wide and lonely land the desert wind came sighing, bringing a vital, an almost stinging freshness of the wastes. Sir Claude gazed out across the plain, then at the gray-haired Frenchwoman with her little liqueur-glass in her fingers.

"Even so, it's a solitary life, madame," he said. "But I suppose you make friends with the Arabs?"

The landlady curled her lips, and an almost malignant, catlike look came into her face.

"Oh, la, la! The Arabs!" she exclaimed. "The Arab is traître, m'sieur. Every Arab that was ever born is traître. You may take my





word for it. I have lived among them nearly all my life. Never trust an Arab. He will live with you for twenty years and then cut your throat for a sou. What I have seen! What I have known among the Arabs! They are clever, but yes! They are handsome. They can get round a man, and as for women—well!" She spread out her hands and shrugged her shoulders. "I myself when I was younger—but enough! The Arab is traître, m'sieu. He will sell his soul for money, and to satisfy his lust he will lie, he will cajole, he will bribe, he will betray, he will murder. I could tell you stories! And an Arab is always an Arab. He never changes. He seems to change—yes, but it is only the surface. The bottom is always the same. He goes to Paris. He speaks French as I do. He learns the lovely manners of the Parisian. Mon Dieu! He might go to a court

if we had one in my beautiful France. And then he comes back to the desert and at once all is forgotten. He sits in the sand, he spits, he eats cous-cous with his fingers—he is a camel, m'sieu, he is a camel. Such is the Arab! Beware of him! Has m'sieu a wife?"

The abrupt question startled Sir Claude, who had been listening to this tirade with a good deal of astonishment.

"Er—yes," he replied, uneasily.

"Never let her have anything to do with the Arabs!"

"Good Lord, madame! As if my wife—"

"Never, never!" continued the landlady, vehemently. "The Arab has a charm for women. I myself have felt it, I who speak to you! He calls and they come. I could tell you of European ladies—but enough! The desert holds its mysteries. I re-



member Benchaâlal, the Spahi, the son of Mohammed Ali, he who came from the Zibans and is now an officer in Algiers. The stories he has told me of his doings! The things he has related to me of the French ladies—"

"The Spahi!" said Sir Claude, more uneasily. "What did you say his name was?"

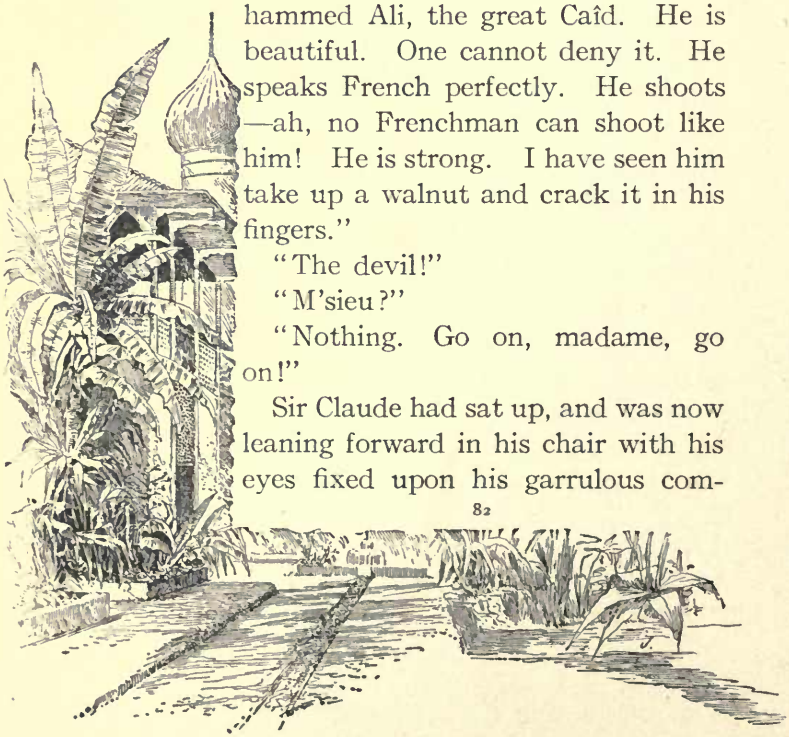
"Benchaâlal, m'sieu, son of Mohammed Ali, the great Caîd. He is beautiful. One cannot deny it. He speaks French perfectly. He shoots—ah, no Frenchman can shoot like him! He is strong. I have seen him take up a walnut and crack it in his fingers."

"The devil!"

"M'sieu?"

"Nothing. Go on, madame, go on!"

Sir Claude had sat up, and was now leaning forward in his chair with his eyes fixed upon his garrulous com-

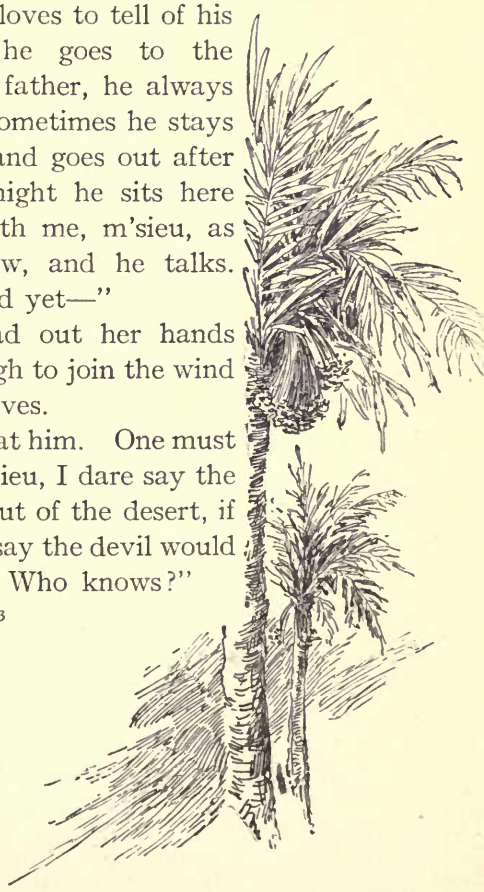


panion. The darkness took the wide spaces of the land, and the night wind came again over the immense flats, and made the dry and dusty leaves of the vine rustle above their heads.

"But he is the most traître of all the Arabs, and he loves to tell of his villanies. When he goes to the desert to visit his father, he always passes by here. Sometimes he stays for a day or two and goes out after gazelle. And at night he sits here under the vine with me, m'sieu, as you are doing now, and he talks. Ah, he is cruel, and yet—"

Again she spread out her hands and blew forth a sigh to join the wind among the vine-leaves.

"One must look at him. One must listen to him. M'sieu, I dare say the devil, if he came out of the desert, if he sat here, I dare say the devil would charm a woman. Who knows?"



"You say he can crack a walnut with his fingers?"

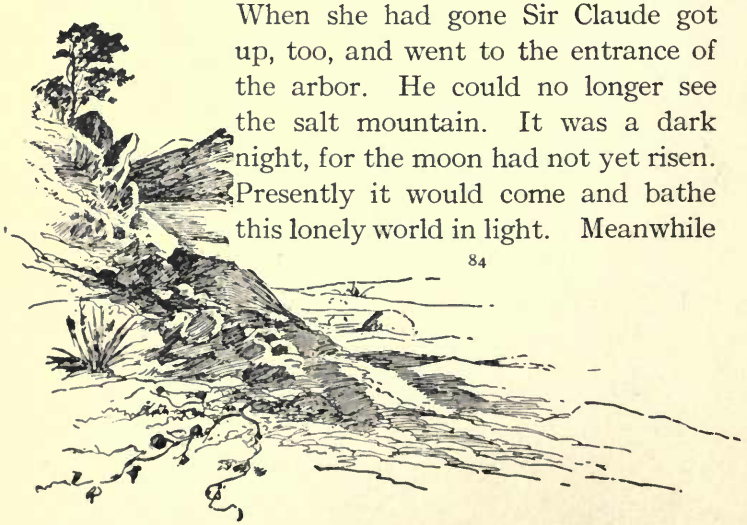
"But yes, m'sieu. And yet his hands are slim as a woman's. Tiens! He should be passing here in a day or two. They tell me he is en congé."

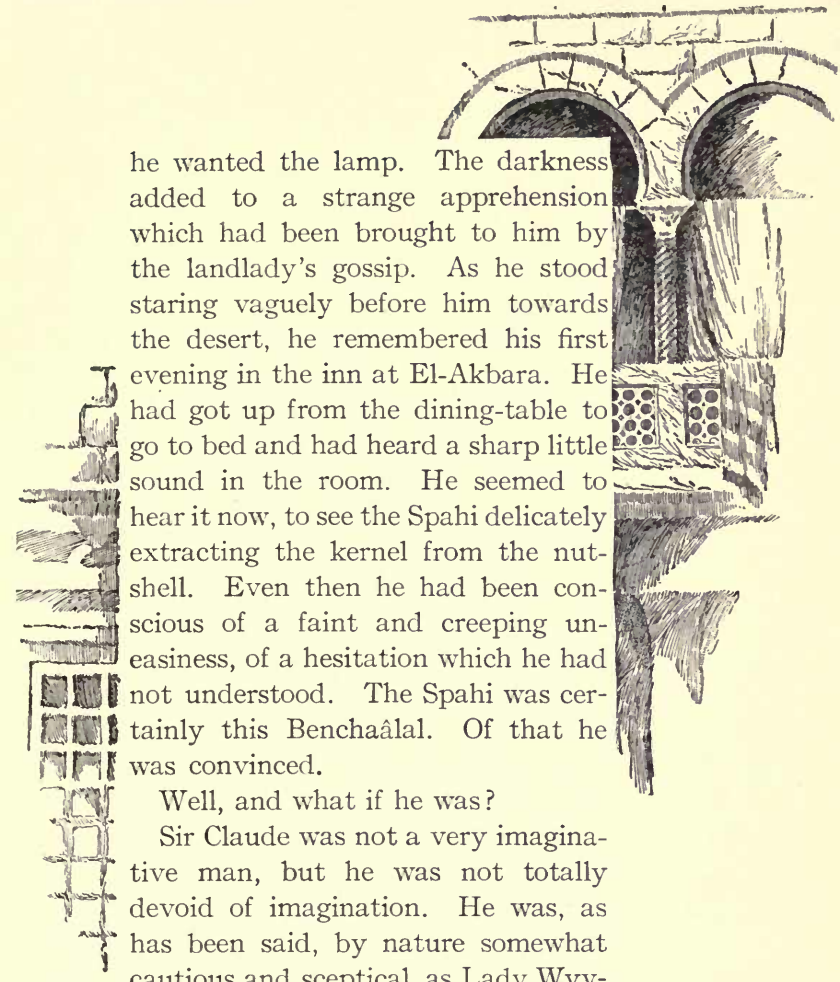
"Who told you so?"

"Do I remember? These things go from mouth to mouth in the desert as quickly as fire from straw to straw. We have news in the desert, I can tell you. It is getting dark. Shall I fetch the lamp out here for m'sieu?"

"Yes, fetch the lamp, madame."

The landlady got up and went quickly in through the door, her gray dress wagging from her broad hips. When she had gone Sir Claude got up, too, and went to the entrance of the arbor. He could no longer see the salt mountain. It was a dark night, for the moon had not yet risen. Presently it would come and bathe this lonely world in light. Meanwhile





he wanted the lamp. The darkness added to a strange apprehension which had been brought to him by the landlady's gossip. As he stood staring vaguely before him towards the desert, he remembered his first evening in the inn at El-Akbara. He had got up from the dining-table to go to bed and had heard a sharp little sound in the room. He seemed to hear it now, to see the Spahi delicately extracting the kernel from the nut-shell. Even then he had been conscious of a faint and creeping uneasiness, of a hesitation which he had not understood. The Spahi was certainly this Benchaâlal. Of that he was convinced.

Well, and what if he was?

Sir Claude was not a very imaginative man, but he was not totally devoid of imagination. He was, as has been said, by nature somewhat cautious and sceptical, as Lady Wyv-



erne was incautious and inclined to superstition and credulity. But he had never doubted his wife. He loved her, but even if he had not, the mere fact that she was his wife would probably have preserved her from any suspicion on his part. Yet he had lived in the London world from time to time and knew what went on sometimes there. He had heard certain husbands laughed at, or sneered at in the clubs, and had seen them welcomed immediately afterwards by the laughers and the sneerers with open hands and hearts. He had known charming women to do things that were not charming—to use no stronger phrase.

What had been the matter with Kitty that morning?

The landlady came back with a lamp which she set down on the table. But now Sir Claude felt restless, as if he could not return to his chair.

"I wonder where Achmed is," he said.

"In the village, m'sieu. Ah, Achmed—he is another of them!"

"Achmed?"

"But yes, m'sieu. The things he has done, the things he will do for a few francs! You would not believe them if I told you."

"Is he—is Achmed a friend of this Spahi?"

"Of Benchaâlal? A friend I would not say. Benchaâlal is proud. And since he has been in Paris—ah, he does not speak with every one, not he!"

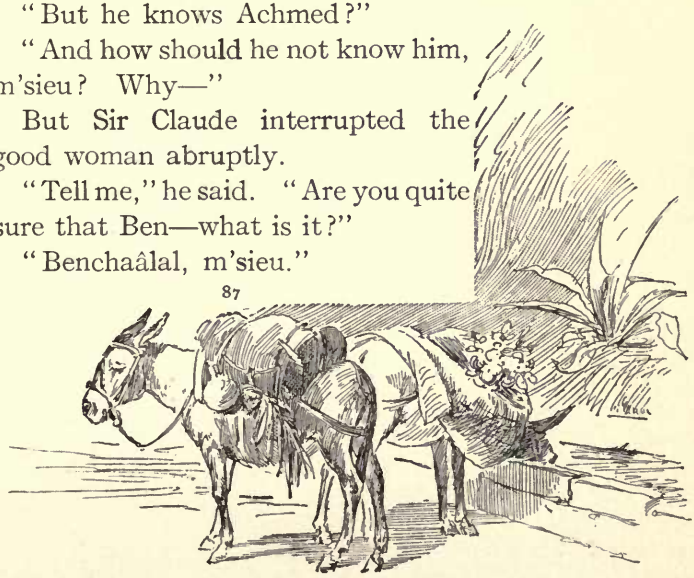
"But he knows Achmed?"

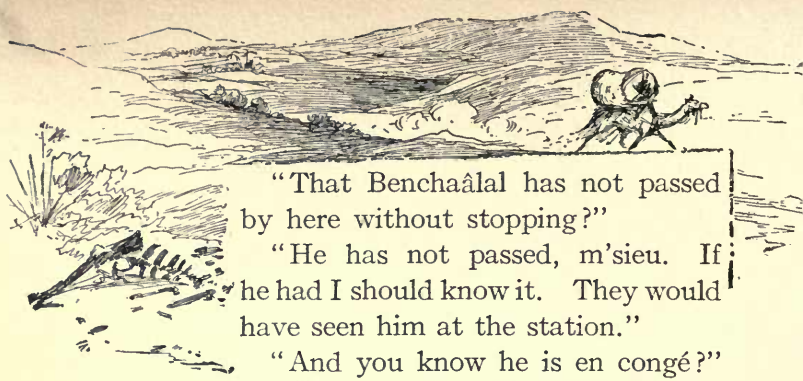
"And how should he not know him, m'sieu? Why—"

But Sir Claude interrupted the good woman abruptly.

"Tell me," he said. "Are you quite sure that Ben—what is it?"

"Benchaâlal, m'sieu."





"That Benchaâlal has not passed by here without stopping?"

"He has not passed, m'sieu. If he had I should know it. They would have seen him at the station."

"And you know he is en congé?"

"M'sieu, he is. He should have come by yesterday at latest, if not the day before. But perhaps he is at El-Akbara, where m'sieu is staying. I asked Achmed."

"What did he say?"

"He said no. But what does that mean? Achmed is an Arab, and an Arab never tells the truth."

"Well, au revoir, madame."

"M'sieu is going to bed already? And just as I have brought the lamp!"

"No, I am going for a stroll to the village. Leave the lamp. I shall soon be back to drink another bottle of wine."

"M'sieu is too good. But is

m'sieu armed? It is not safe to wander at night without arms."

Grimly Sir Claude looked at her, pulling out of one of his pockets the muzzle of a revolver.

"It's all right, madame."

"Bien! Bien! Au revoir, m'sieu."

"Au revoir, madame."

He walked away in the darkness. The landlady stood under the vine looking after him.

"What has he?" she said to herself.

She had noticed that a change had come over her guest while she had been talking, that his air of calm satisfaction, peculiar to the successful hunter full fed after a long day's sport, had given place to a moody anxiety, a restlessness that betokened an altered mood.

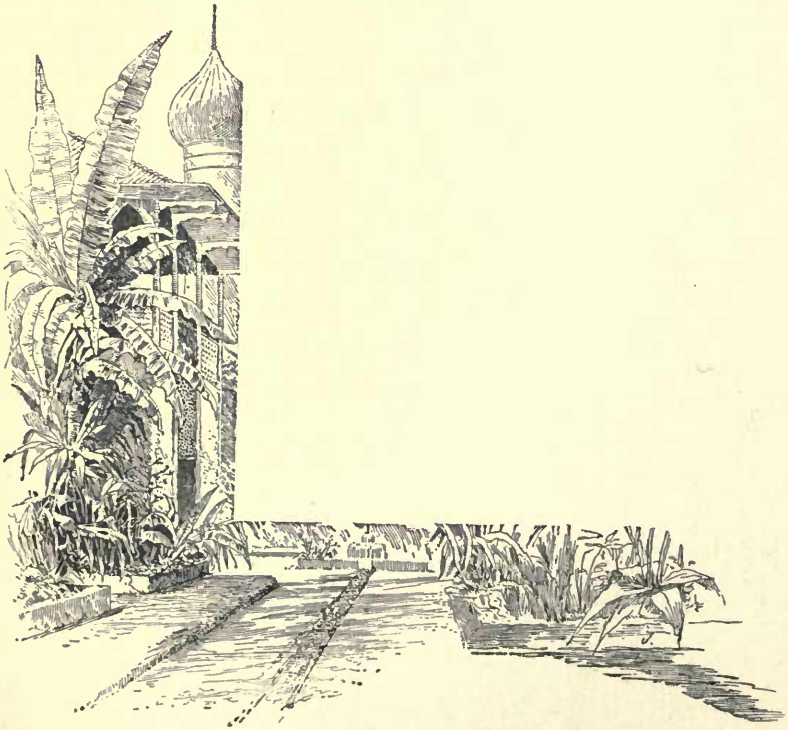
"What has he, this monsieur?" she repeated to herself.

The wind from the desert blew more strongly among the vine leaves



above her head, and the lamp flame flickered uneasily.

Behind the salt mountain there grew slowly a pale light that heralded the coming of the moon.



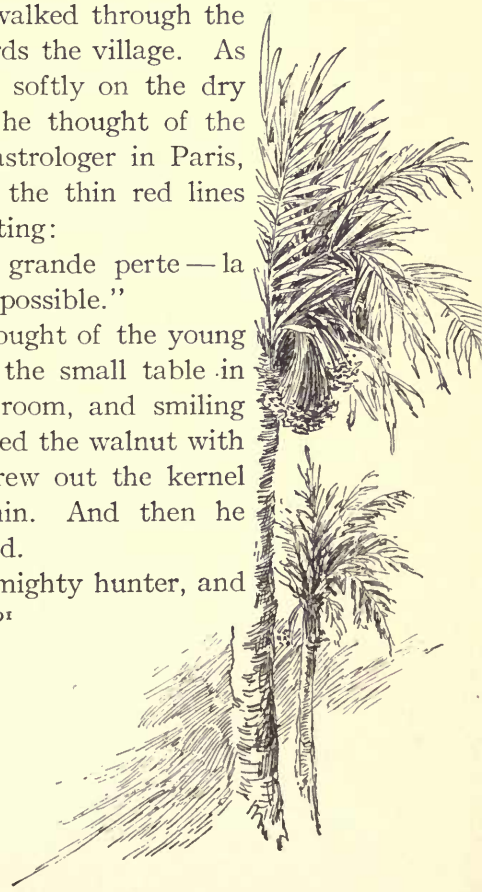
VIII

SIR CLAUDE walked through the darkness towards the village. As he went, treading softly on the dry and sandy road, he thought of the prophecy of the astrologer in Paris, he seemed to see the thin red lines of meticulous writing:

"Danger d'une grande perte — la plus grande perte possible."

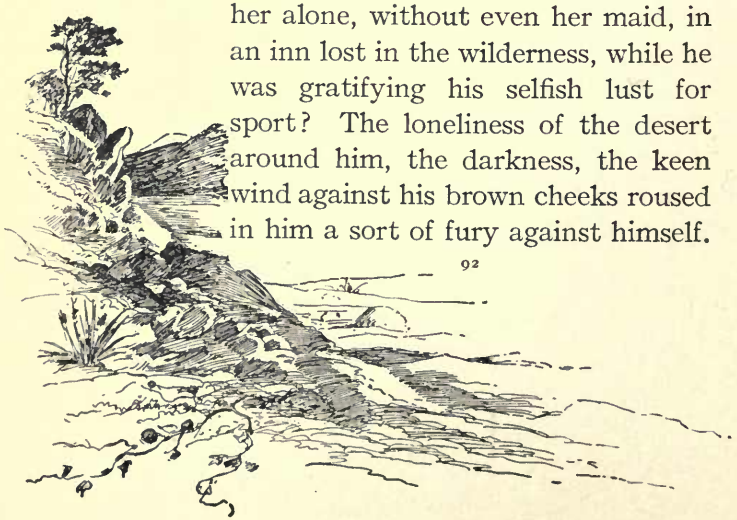
And then he thought of the young Spahi, sitting by the small table in the hotel dining-room, and smiling gently as he cracked the walnut with his fingers and drew out the kernel that nestled within. And then he thought of Achmed.

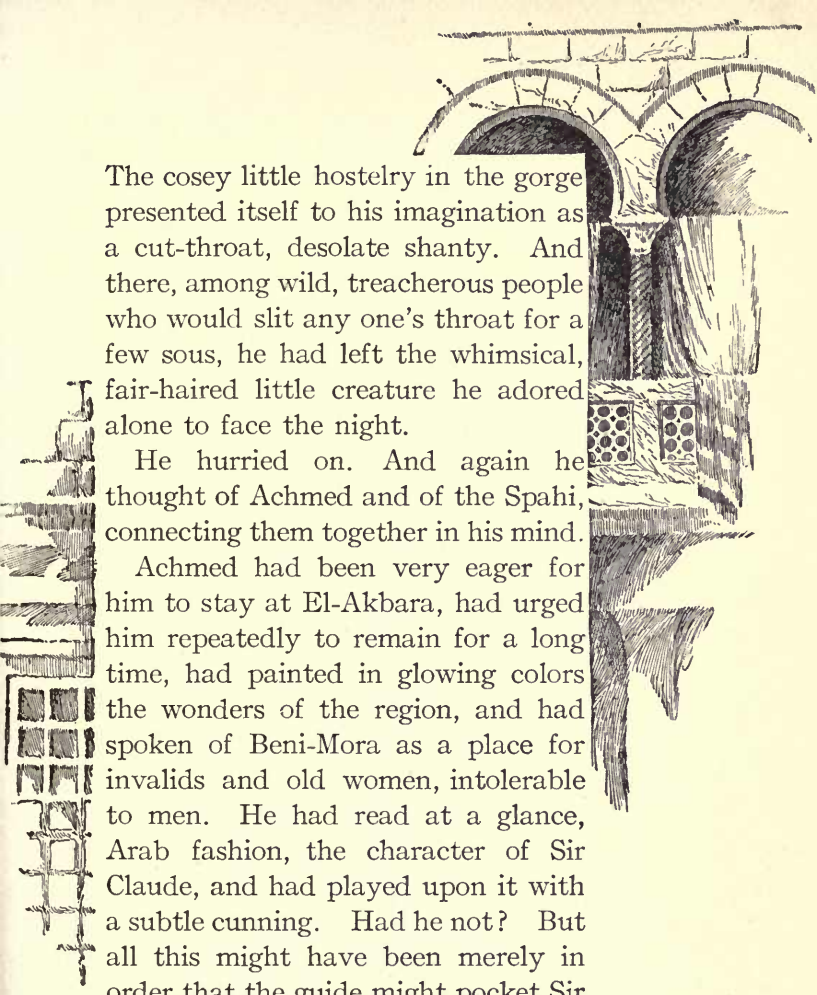
Achmed was a mighty hunter, and



had won Sir Claude's enthusiastic admiration. Tall, lithe, one-eyed, with long, yellow teeth shaded by a thin, wiry, black mustache, he was not beautiful to look upon. But he knew his business and took a pleasure in it. He had been eager for these sporting expeditions. Perhaps he had been too eager.

The landlady of the *auberge* had an influence. She had infected Sir Claude with her own distrust of these desert men. Of his wife he was thinking now, with the anxious, protective sentiment of the strong, loving man; of himself with an angry bitterness. How could he have left her alone, without even her maid, in an inn lost in the wilderness, while he was gratifying his selfish lust for sport? The loneliness of the desert around him, the darkness, the keen wind against his brown cheeks roused in him a sort of fury against himself.





The cosey little hostelry in the gorge presented itself to his imagination as a cut-throat, desolate shanty. And there, among wild, treacherous people who would slit any one's throat for a few sous, he had left the whimsical, fair-haired little creature he adored alone to face the night.

He hurried on. And again he thought of Achmed and of the Spahi, connecting them together in his mind.

Achmed had been very eager for him to stay at El-Akbara, had urged him repeatedly to remain for a long time, had painted in glowing colors the wonders of the region, and had spoken of Beni-Mora as a place for invalids and old women, intolerable to men. He had read at a glance, Arab fashion, the character of Sir Claude, and had played upon it with a subtle cunning. Had he not? But all this might have been merely in order that the guide might pocket Sir



Claude's money. That would be reason enough for his persuasion.

"P'r'aps it's all rot!" said Sir Claude to himself, resorting to his favorite phrase.

Nevertheless, he hurried on till he came to the first earth houses of the village. Their doors of palm were shut. Here and there, above these shut doors, the skulls of camels grinned. Through the eye-sockets strings of red pepper were hung. Upon the flat roofs lean white, or yellow, dogs ran to and fro, bending down their heads and barking furiously at the stranger as he passed.

Again Sir Claude was conscious of the savagery of this land, and was stabbed by remorse for his selfish carelessness. Like many men who are not clever, he was inclined either to minimize or to exaggerate things. He had thought nothing of leaving his wife alone for a night. Now he

thought too much of it. It seemed to him a monstrous dereliction of duty.

A shadow stole out from among the blind and shadowy houses and padded softly after him on bare feet. He turned sharply, his hand on his revolver.

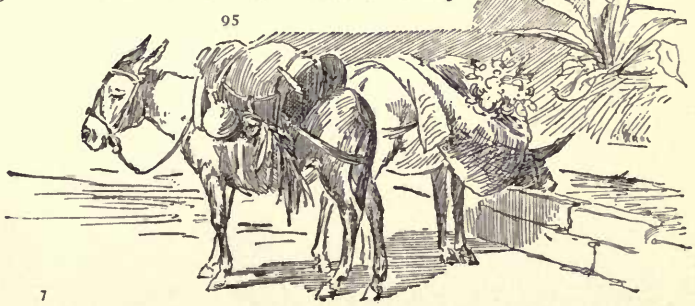
"What d' you want?" he said, in French.

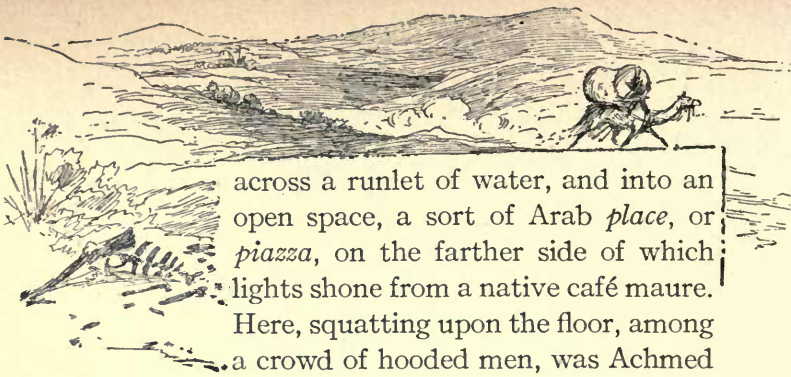
The shadow stopped and gazed at him steadily, with glittering eyes above which a hood was drawn forward hiding the head.

Sir Claude repeated his question, but got no answer.

"Here, you come along with me!" he exclaimed. "I won't have you behind."

He made an explanatory gesture. The shadow understood it and quietly obeyed. Evidently comprehending why the stranger was there, it guided him down a narrow alley,





across a runlet of water, and into an open space, a sort of Arab *place*, or *piazza*, on the farther side of which lights shone from a native café maure. Here, squatting upon the floor, among a crowd of hooded men, was Achmed with a coffee-cup beside him, intent on playing draughts.

When he saw his master he instantly rose with a smile, pushed his companions away without ceremony, and invited Sir Claude to come in and sit down on an earthen divan. But Sir Claude had no mind for pleasure.

"Come out, Achmed!" he said, standing rigid in the low doorway. "I want to speak to you."

Achmed seriously saluted his friends, swung a fold of his burnous over his left shoulder, picked out his pair of yellow slippers from a medley against the wall, and gently stepped across to Sir Claude and followed him out into the night.

The shadow glided after them.

"Here, I say," said Sir Claude, irritably. "Get rid of this fellow. Give him something—this." He held out a franc. "And tell him to be off."

Achmed obeyed, and the shadow evaporated into the darkness.

When they were alone, walking back towards the *auberge*, Sir Claude began:

"How long would it take to get back to El-Akbara?"

"El-Akbara, m'sieu! But it is impossible."

"Answer my question. How long would it take?"

"If we start early to-morrow, m'sieu, at sunrise—"

"I don't mean to-morrow. I mean to-night."

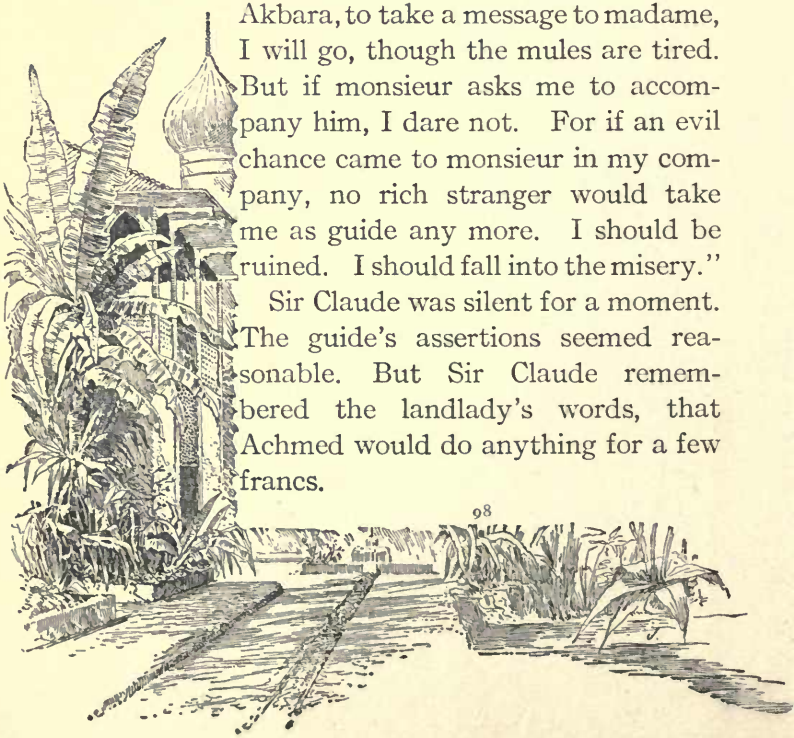
"I do not know, m'sieu. One does not make such a journey at night in the desert with a stranger."



"With a stranger? What difference does that make?"

"A rich stranger would not be safe at night in the desert. I am poor. I have nothing—nothing." He flung out his arms in a large, despairing gesture, keeping his one eye fixed steadily on Sir Claude. "Therefore, I can go where I will. If monsieur wishes me to return to-night to El-Akbara, to take a message to madame, I will go, though the mules are tired. But if monsieur asks me to accompany him, I dare not. For if an evil chance came to monsieur in my company, no rich stranger would take me as guide any more. I should be ruined. I should fall into the misery."

Sir Claude was silent for a moment. The guide's assertions seemed reasonable. But Sir Claude remembered the landlady's words, that Achmed would do anything for a few francs.



"And what if I paid you well?" he said. "What if I gave you a hundred francs?"

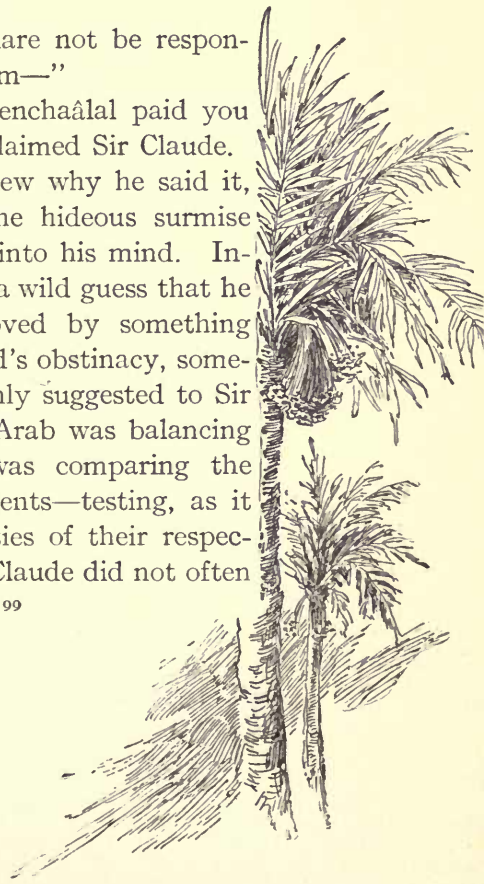
"Monsieur says—?"

"Suppose I gave you a hundred francs to come with me now, to-night, back to El-Akbara! Wouldn't you come?"

"Monsieur, I dare not be responsible. If any harm—"

"What—has Benchaâlal paid you more, then?" exclaimed Sir Claude.

He scarcely knew why he said it, why the ugly, the hideous surmise abruptly started into his mind. Indeed, it was only a wild guess that he was making, moved by something uneasy in Achmed's obstinacy, something that suddenly suggested to Sir Claude that the Arab was balancing two offers, or was comparing the merits of two clients—testing, as it were, the capacities of their respective purses. Sir Claude did not often



show intuition, but to-night there was unusual tension on his nerves. Something in his heart seemed to play upon his intellect, to wake it up into a quickness that was not normal.

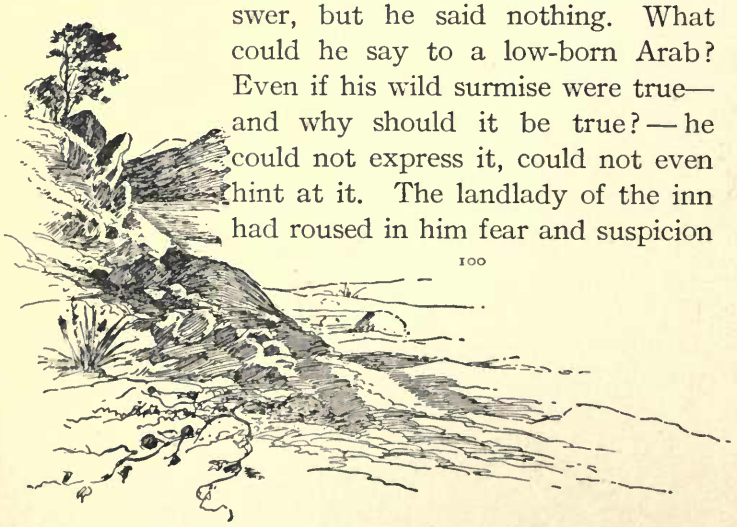
"Benchaâlal, monsieur?" said Achmed. "Who is that?"

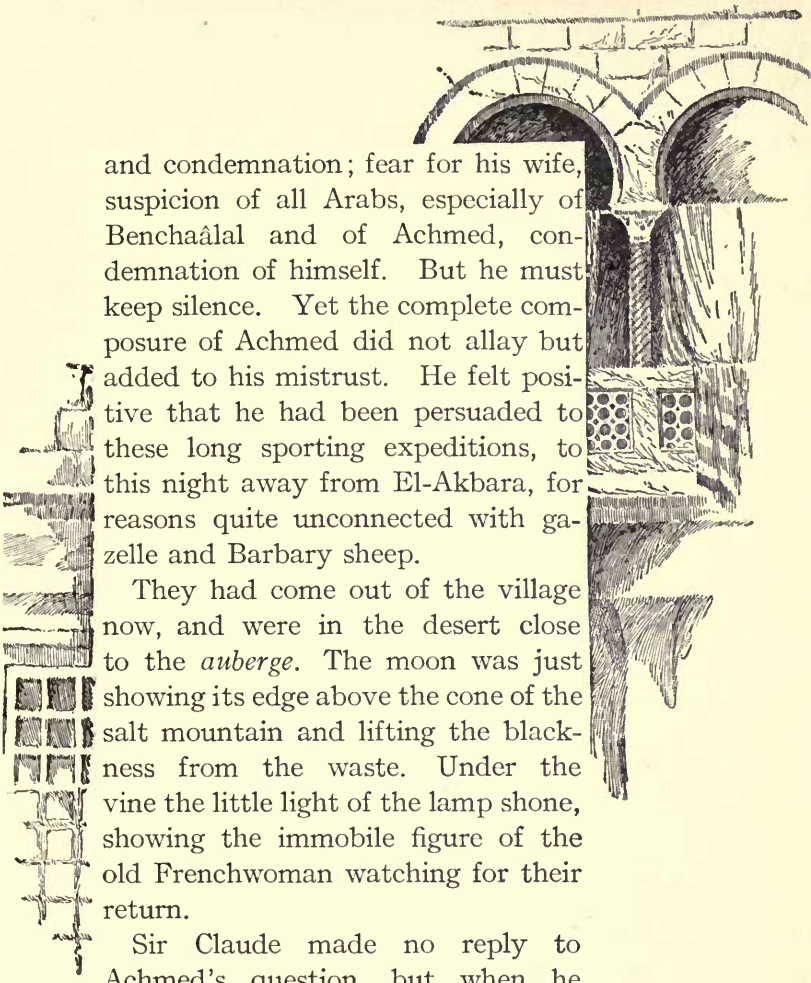
"You damned, deceitful rascal, you know well enough! Benchaâlal, the Spahi, the officer from Algiers, who is staying at the inn at El-Akbara."

Convicted of deception, Achmed, with perfect composure, left that question and inquired:

"And why should Benchaâlal give me money?"

Sir Claude opened his lips to answer, but he said nothing. What could he say to a low-born Arab? Even if his wild surmise were true—and why should it be true?—he could not express it, could not even hint at it. The landlady of the inn had roused in him fear and suspicion





and condemnation; fear for his wife, suspicion of all Arabs, especially of Benchaâlal and of Achmed, condemnation of himself. But he must keep silence. Yet the complete composure of Achmed did not allay but added to his mistrust. He felt positive that he had been persuaded to these long sporting expeditions, to this night away from El-Akbara, for reasons quite unconnected with gazelle and Barbary sheep.

They had come out of the village now, and were in the desert close to the *auberge*. The moon was just showing its edge above the cone of the salt mountain and lifting the blackness from the waste. Under the vine the little light of the lamp shone, showing the immobile figure of the old Frenchwoman watching for their return.

Sir Claude made no reply to Achmed's question, but when he



reached the *auberge* he suddenly said to Achmed.

"Now, you just tell madame and me why you said to madame that Benchaâlal was not staying at El-Akbara!"

"Monsieur, I did not say so! How could I when Benchaâlal is there?"

Sir Claude turned to the landlady, who was looking surprised and very curious.

"Didn't you assure me, madame—?" he began.

But the landlady interrupted him.

"Monsieur may talk all night, and all the nights of the year, but he will never have reason of an Arab."

She spread out her hands and shrugged her shoulders.

"C'est une sale race!" she whispered into Sir Claude's ear.

He stood for a moment staring at the sand, his hands in his pockets. The moonlight grew. Its light de-

cided him. He lifted up his head with a jerk of his chin.

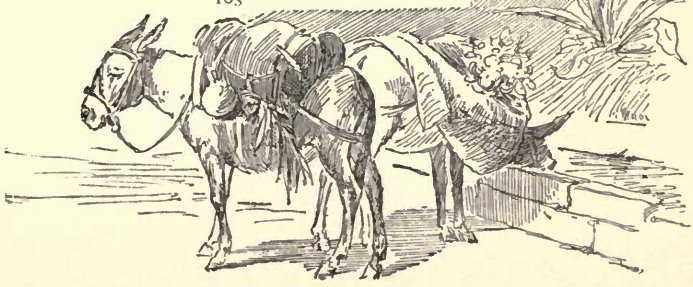
"Go and get the mules!" he said to Achmed. "Go!"

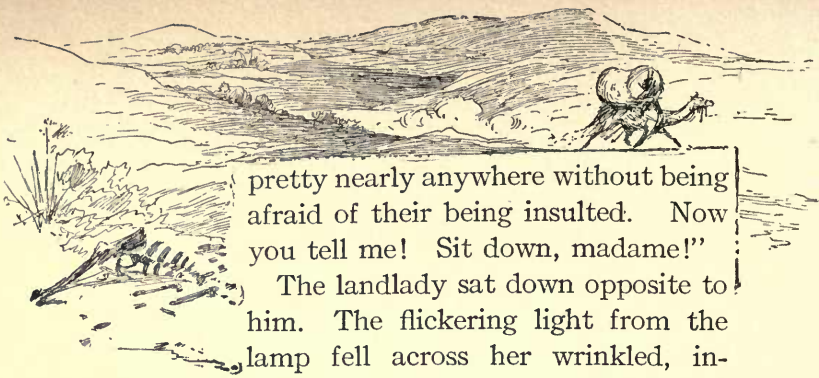
The guide stared at him for a minute, then evidently realized that there was no appeal from that command, and disappeared through the doorway of the *auberge* to the inner court, where the beasts were stabled.

The landlady looked amazed.

"Monsieur is not going? But it is not possible! Monsieur—"

"Look here, madame," said Sir Claude, sitting down by the little table, on which, by the lamp, was already set the bottle of wine which he had promised to drink when he returned from the village. "Look here—you've been telling me about the Arabs! I don't know them. I'm a stranger here. I come from England, where you can take a man's word, and trust your womenkind





pretty nearly anywhere without being afraid of their being insulted. Now you tell me! Sit down, madame!"

The landlady sat down opposite to him. The flickering light from the lamp fell across her wrinkled, intelligent face, and brightened the eyes which were fixed intently upon her guest.

"And you tell me! I've got a wife, madame, a little thing, young, a girl almost she is, and about the prettiest woman in England. I've got her out here in Africa."

"Where is she, monsieur?"

"At the inn at El-Akbara. This chap, this Benchaâlal, is there. I've seen him. I saw the damned fellow the first night we got there. Now, what should he be staying on day after day for, instead of going to his home, to his damned mud hut in the desert? And why should Achmed deny to you that he was there, and

pretend to me that he had never heard of him, till I showed that I knew? And why should Achmed get me away from the inn every day, and persuade me to-night to be here, leaving my wife alone among a lot of scoundrels? Don't you think there's something up, madame? Don't you think, if you were me, you'd get back to your wife—yes, get back to her even if the mules hadn't six legs to go upon between them?"

He struck his big hand upon the table and made the bottle jump and the lamp sway and shiver. The landlady pursed her lips, put up the middle finger of her right hand to her chin and took it away again.

"So," she said, after a pause. "So Benchaâlal is at El-Akbara! I thought as much."

"Why?" said Sir Claude, sharply.

Everything made him uneasy and suspicious to-night.



"Something in Achmed's manner when I asked him and he denied it. And yet he lies well, like all the Arabs. But there was a something, Sidi. He didn't want to talk of Benchaâlal."

Sir Claude leaned over the table towards her.

"You think there's something up?"

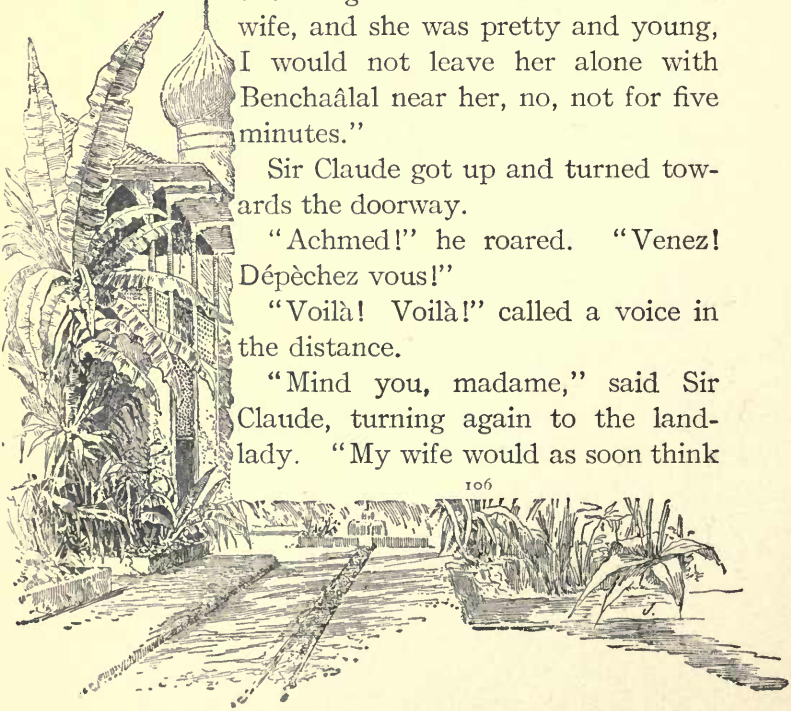
"Monsieur, how can I know? But one thing I know is this—if I had a wife, and she was pretty and young, I would not leave her alone with Benchaâlal near her, no, not for five minutes."

Sir Claude got up and turned towards the doorway.

"Achmed!" he roared. "Venez! Dépèchez vous!"

"Voilà! Voilà!" called a voice in the distance.

"Mind you, madame," said Sir Claude, turning again to the landlady. "My wife would as soon think

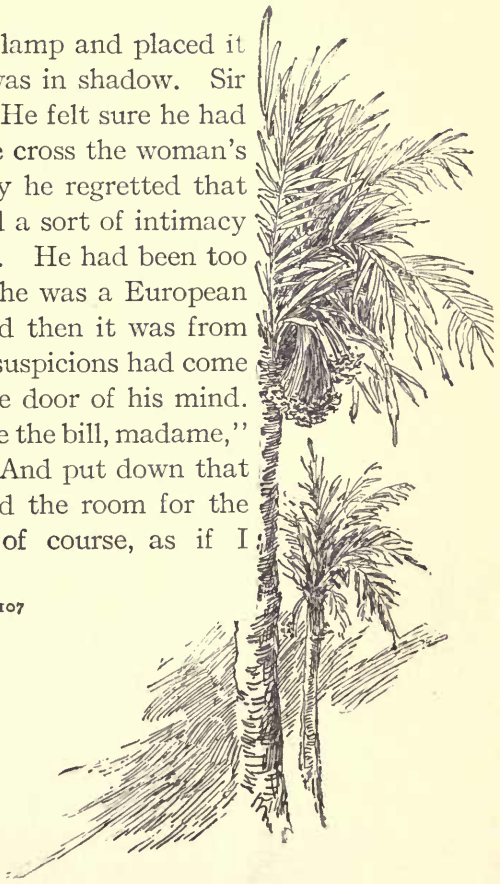


of tryin' to fly as of havin' anything to do with one of these damned blacks. As a friend, I mean—as a guide, of course! What are you smilin' at?"

"Nothing, m'sieu. I was not smiling. Monsieur was deceived by the lamplight. There's a wind getting up."

She moved the lamp and placed it so that her face was in shadow. Sir Claude grunted. He felt sure he had seen an ugly smile cross the woman's face, and suddenly he regretted that he had established a sort of intimacy with this stranger. He had been too impulsive. But she was a European and a woman, and then it was from her that all these suspicions had come to knock upon the door of his mind.

"Kindly give me the bill, madame," he said, stiffly. "And put down that bottle of wine and the room for the night. I'll pay, of course, as if I stayed."



"Monsieur is too good."

She went softly in-doors. And as soon as her back was turned she smiled again to herself.

"Mon Dieu!" she thought. "These men! These men with the prettiest wives in the world! What babies they are! What babies! Que diable!"

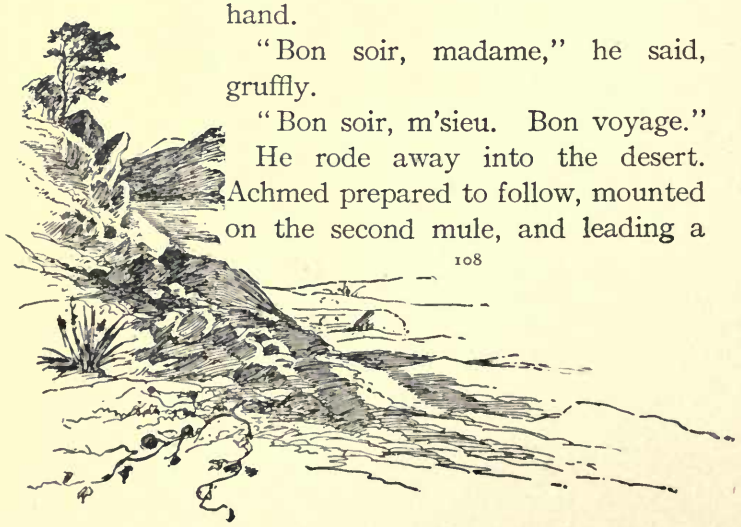
She sat down by the light of a tallow candle at her greasy table, and made out a good, stiff bill for the baby to pay.

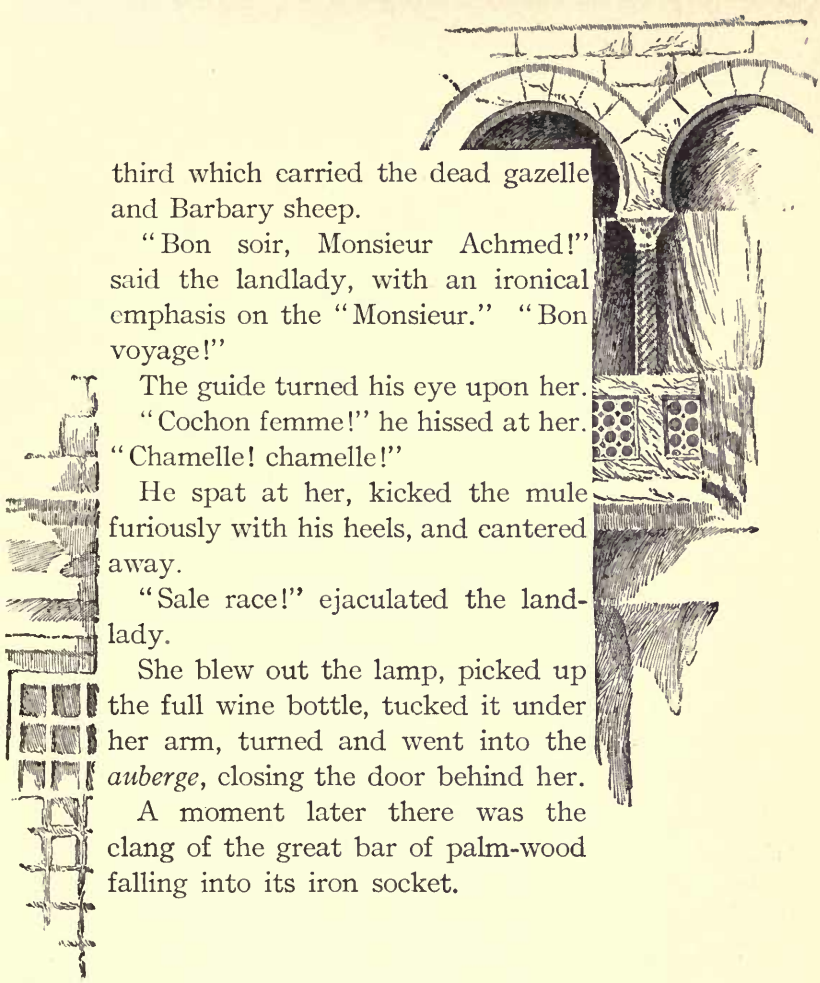
Achmed was a long time getting the mules, but at last he was ready, the account was settled, and Sir Claude was in the saddle, his gun slung beside him and his revolver ready to his hand.

"Bon soir, madame," he said, gruffly.

"Bon soir, m'sieu. Bon voyage."

He rode away into the desert. Achmed prepared to follow, mounted on the second mule, and leading a





third which carried the dead gazelle and Barbary sheep.

"Bon soir, Monsieur Achmed!" said the landlady, with an ironical emphasis on the "Monsieur." "Bon voyage!"

The guide turned his eye upon her.

"Cochon femme!" he hissed at her. "Chamelle! chamelle!"

He spat at her, kicked the mule furiously with his heels, and cantered away.

"Sale race!" ejaculated the landlady.

She blew out the lamp, picked up the full wine bottle, tucked it under her arm, turned and went into the *auberge*, closing the door behind her.

A moment later there was the clang of the great bar of palm-wood falling into its iron socket.



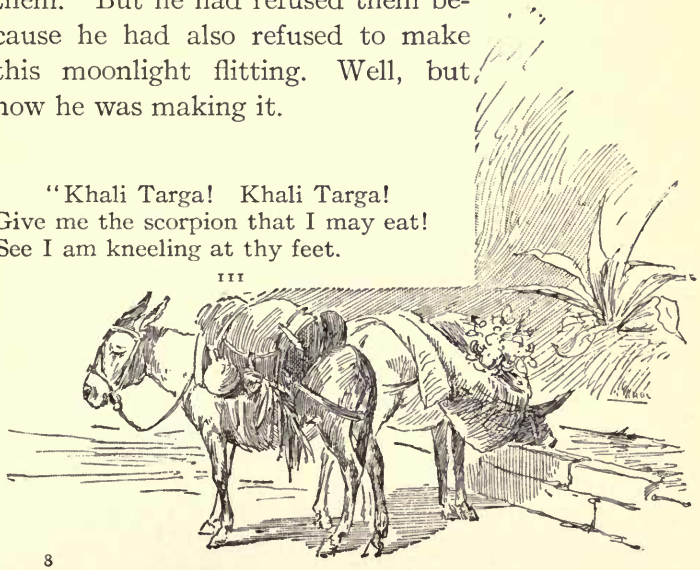
IX

THAT was a long and weary journey by the light of the moon. At first Sir Claude kept in front, but presently he got off the track, and Achmed was obliged to ride up and go ahead to show the way. He passed Sir Claude morosely, without looking at him, and took the lead. On and on they went, always towards the dark range of mountains that showed where the desert ended. Sir Claude kept his eyes fixed upon it. The mules went slowly. Poor beasts, they were really tired and needed a night's rest. Like most Englishmen, Sir Claude was solicitous for all

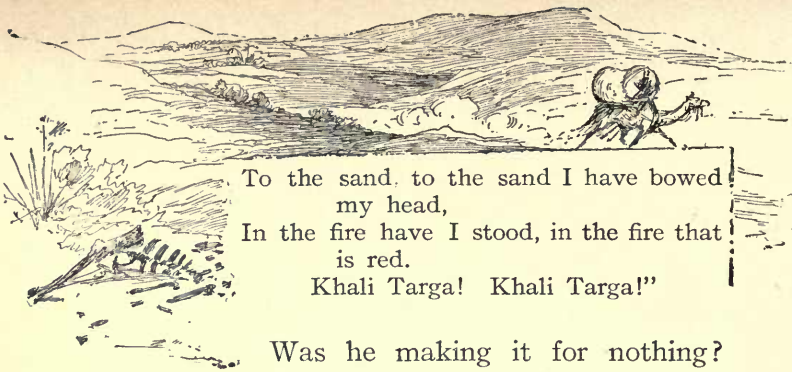
animals that did him service. And more than once his conscience pricked him as he encouraged his mule with voice and hand. Achmed did not care. The mules were not his, and no thought of an animal's suffering pained his imagination.

Presently he began to sing in a whining, plaintive voice. His sulkiness was subsiding as his active, greedy mind began to work, helped by the monotonous motion across the plain. The stranger, the rich Englishman, had offered him one hundred francs to do the very thing he was now doing. And he had refused them. But he had refused them because he had also refused to make this moonlight flitting. Well, but now he was making it.

"Khali Targa! Khali Targa!
Give me the scorpion that I may eat!
See I am kneeling at thy feet.



III



To the sand, to the sand I have bowed
my head,
In the fire have I stood, in the fire that
is red.
Khali Targa! Khali Targa!"

Was he making it for nothing? This thought disgusted him. While he sang he was planning a campaign, and in the planning his fury was evaporating.

"Khali Targa! Khali Targa!
Give me the glass that I may eat!
See I am crouching at thy feet.
In my belly the living scorpion lies,
In my heart the fierce lust for paradise—
Khali Targa! Khali Targa!"

Never yet had Achmed been "bested" by a Roumi. The mere thought of such a catastrophe stirred all his faculties. Since he had been obliged to undertake this journey, he must be well paid for it. The Roumi should be his prey, the Roumi who had miscalled him, who had forced him to

play false to one of his own creed, to one of his own people.

"Khali Targa! Khali Targa!
Give me the knife that my flesh desires,
As it longed for the licking tongues of the fires.
The glass with the scorpion has gone to rest;
Give the curving knife to my naked breast.
Khali Targa! Khali Targa!"

"Achmed!"

Sir Claude's voice shouted from behind. Achmed stopped his singing and turned half round upon his mule.

"Sidi?" he said, politely.

"If you don't want to drive me mad, stop that cursed whining!"

"As monsieur wishes!"

He pulled in his mule and Sir Claude came up with him.

"What the devil were you singing about?"

"Monsieur, I was singing the song



of the Aïssaoui, they who stand in the fire and eat scorpions and glass, and drive in the steel behind their eyes, and are carried with their naked breasts upon sharp knives."

Sir Claude twisted his body in a sort of heavy shudder.

"Cheerful!" he ejaculated. "How long shall we be?"

"Monsieur, I cannot tell. The mules are weary. This is a cruel journey."

He sighed, keenly regarding Sir Claude with his one eye.

"Never before, after hunting all the day, have I been made to travel all the night."

Sir Claude's mule stumbled.

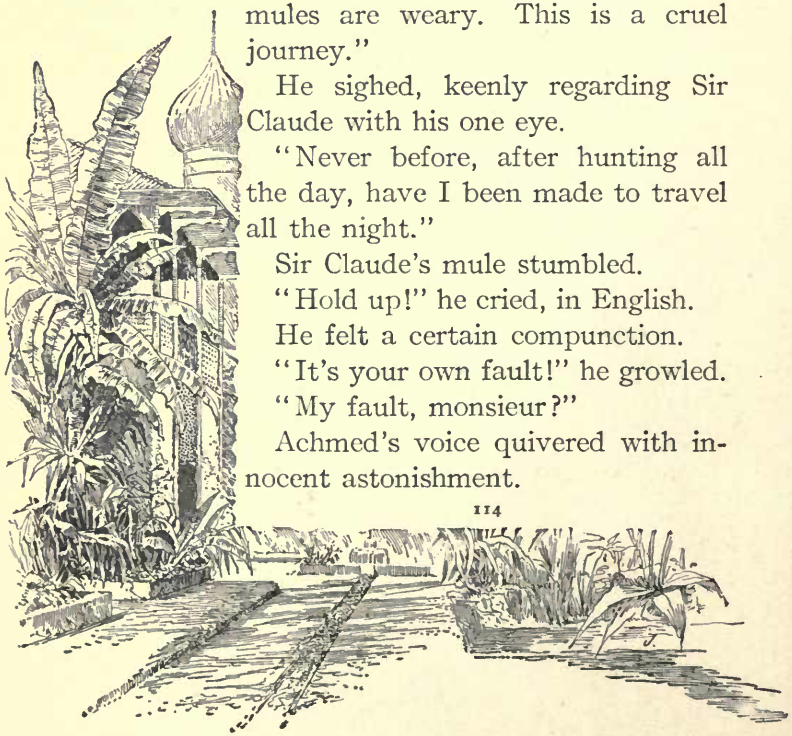
"Hold up!" he cried, in English.

He felt a certain compunction.

"It's your own fault!" he growled.

"My fault, monsieur?"

Achmed's voice quivered with innocent astonishment.



"Well, if it isn't—"

Sir Claude broke off. After all, he did not know anything. He was only suspicious. And it seemed to him impossible either to confirm or to destroy his suspicions at present. For how could he question Achmed without showing that he was anxious for his wife's safety? And how could he let a "damned black" know that he had ever, in his thoughts, connected her beauty and purity with the desires of a Spahi?

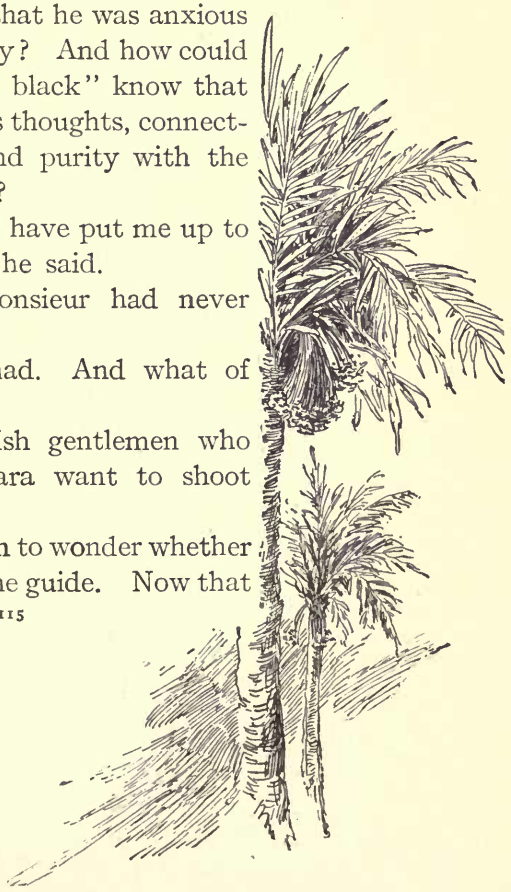
"You shouldn't have put me up to this expedition," he said.

"I thought monsieur had never shot gazelle."

"No more I had. And what of that?"

"All the English gentlemen who come to El-Akbara want to shoot gazelle."

Sir Claude began to wonder whether he had wronged the guide. Now that



the old Frenchwoman's influence was removed, he felt less suspicious. It was she who had alarmed him by her diatribes against the Arabs. Perhaps she was a silly old woman, an alarmist, even a liar. But then Achmed had lied about this Benchaâlal.

"Monsieur promised me—"

It was Achmed's voice with its most insinuating intonation.

"Eh?"

"Monsieur promised me a hundred francs if I protected him through the night to El-Akbara."

"Protected!"

Sir Claude laughed.

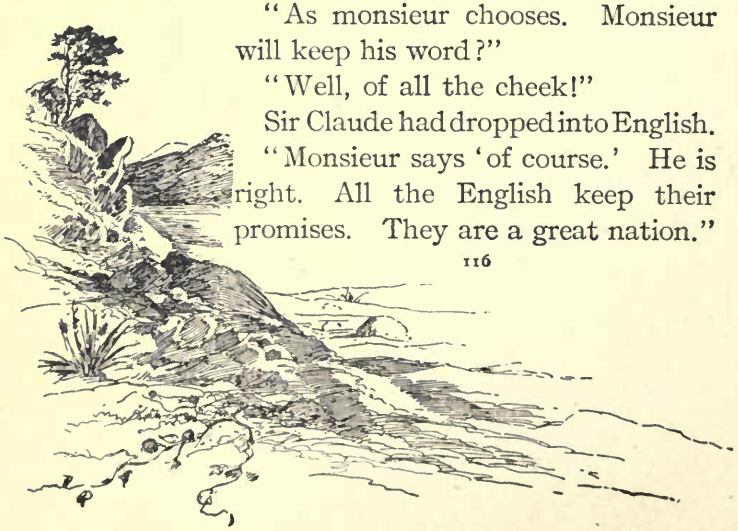
"Showed me the way, you mean."

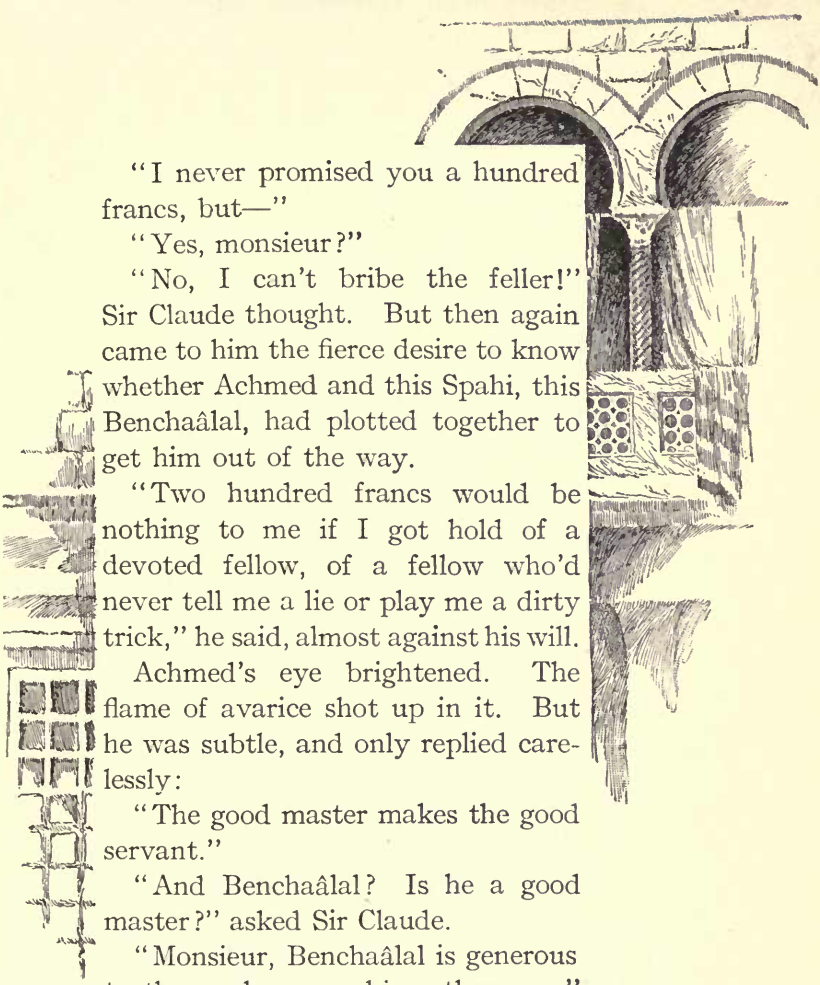
"As monsieur chooses. Monsieur will keep his word?"

"Well, of all the cheek!"

Sir Claude had dropped into English.

"Monsieur says 'of course.' He is right. All the English keep their promises. They are a great nation."





"I never promised you a hundred francs, but—"

"Yes, monsieur?"

"No, I can't bribe the feller!" Sir Claude thought. But then again came to him the fierce desire to know whether Achmed and this Spahi, this Benchaâlal, had plotted together to get him out of the way.

"Two hundred francs would be nothing to me if I got hold of a devoted fellow, of a fellow who'd never tell me a lie or play me a dirty trick," he said, almost against his will.

Achmed's eye brightened. The flame of avarice shot up in it. But he was subtle, and only replied carelessly:

"The good master makes the good servant."

"And Benchaâlal? Is he a good master?" asked Sir Claude.

"Monsieur, Benchaâlal is generous to those who serve him—they say."



"And to you? Is he generous to you?"

"Monsieur, I am not the servant of Benchaâlal."

"What? Have you never gone hunting with him?"

"Oh yes, monsieur. And when Benchaâlal hunts he pays well. But he pays afterwards."

There was—or so Sir Claude thought—a strong significance in Achmed's voice as he said the last words. His blood grew hot. He longed to strike the guide, to knock him off his mule with a straight blow from the shoulder and to see him roll over in the sand.

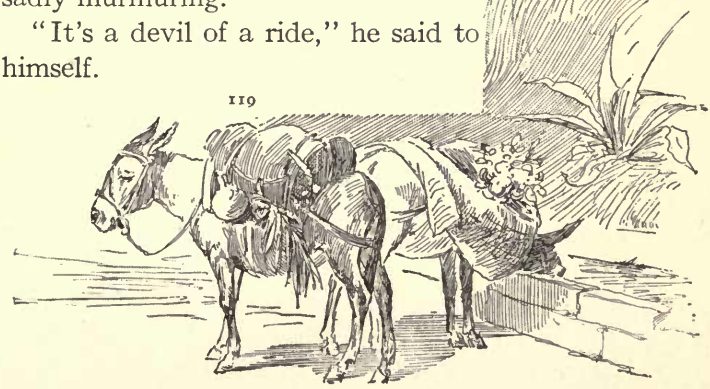
"No," he thought to himself, "I'm damned if I can have anything to do with the feller. I'll shift for myself. To-morrow I'll take Kitty away to Beni-Mora. She'll be glad to go. She wanted to go before. I've been a selfish beast, but there can't be any harm done, even if that beastly black

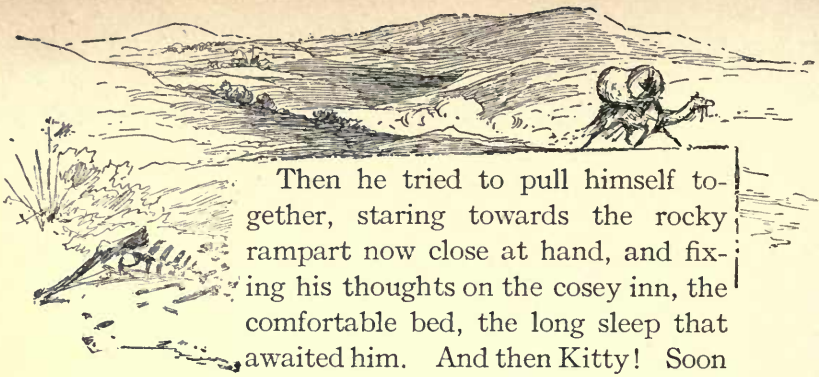
has been up to some devilry with Achmed."

And Achmed could get nothing more out of him. To all the Arab's insinuating remarks he returned gruff monosyllabic replies, and at last they rode on, hour after hour, in complete silence, coming ever nearer to the black wall of mountains that was their destination.

It was towards dawn when the mules set their feet upon the firm, well-made road that leads to the three villages of the oasis of El-Akbara. The moon was waning, the wind at their backs was colder, and Sir Claude, strong though he was, felt an unusual sense of fatigue laying hold of him, an unusual depression, no doubt purely physical, stealing upon his spirit, almost like a stealthy tide, frigid and sadly murmuring.

"It's a devil of a ride," he said to himself.





Then he tried to pull himself together, staring towards the rocky rampart now close at hand, and fixing his thoughts on the cosey inn, the comfortable bed, the long sleep that awaited him. And then Kitty! Soon he would see her. He pictured himself stealing into her room, shading the candle with his hand, and looking down on her slight form, her pretty, fair head with the yellow hair spread out over the pillow.

He bent his long legs backward and struck his tired mule with his heels. The poor brute, whose tripping walk had long since degenerated into an uneasy shamble, started forward in a sort of convulsive canter, and passed Achmed, who was hunched up and seemed to have fallen asleep shrouded in his burnous with the hood drawn closely round his face. But the canter only lasted a moment. The animal was nearly dead beat,

like its rider, and subsided almost at once into its former tragic pace.

As Sir Claude passed him, Achmed's one eye peered sharply forth from the shadow of the hood, and when his master's mule ceased from cantering, the guide sat up on his pack-saddle and threw off his elaborate pretence of sleep. He had a knife hidden under his burnous, and now he laid his hand upon it, looking steadily at the hind-legs of the mule in front. He wanted to get into El-Akbara before Sir Claude, and he was considering how to accomplish this without waking suspicion in the Roumi. The failure of his attempt to wheedle his employer into parting with the hundred francs he longed for irritated him, almost infuriated him. He knew that he would not get the money, and he hated Sir Claude as an Arab hates the man always who baffles his greed. Presently he drew



his knife from its sheath of goat-skin, slipped softly from his mule, and stealthily approached Sir Claude's, keeping his eye fixed warily on its rider. He did not act at once, but walked for two or three minutes noiselessly as a ghost at the tail of the mule, till he felt certain he could do his deed unobserved. Then he bent down, still keeping up with the beast, the hand with the knife in it hung for a second above the shambling, hairy legs, came nearer to them, came close to them.

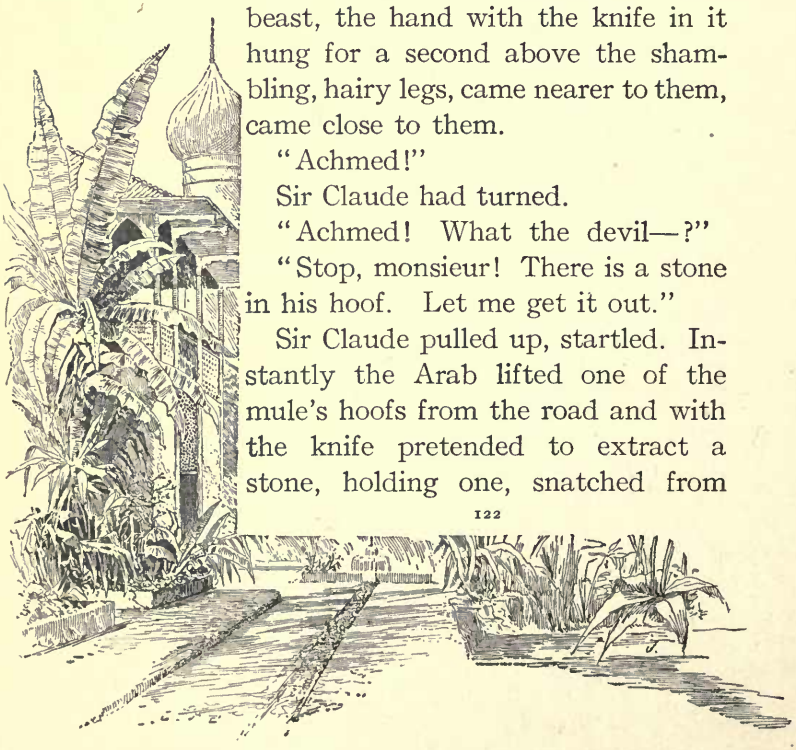
"Achmed!"

Sir Claude had turned.

"Achmed! What the devil—?"

"Stop, monsieur! There is a stone in his hoof. Let me get it out."

Sir Claude pulled up, startled. Instantly the Arab lifted one of the mule's hoofs from the road and with the knife pretended to extract a stone, holding one, snatched from



the road, up a second later, then flinging it away.

"I saw he was going lame, monsieur. C'est ca!"

Calmly he returned his knife to its sheath.

"I didn't notice anything."

Sir Claude was looking at him with keen suspicion.

"Monsieur, I was behind. I could see."

"I thought you were asleep."

"The Arab does not sleep when he is protecting his master."

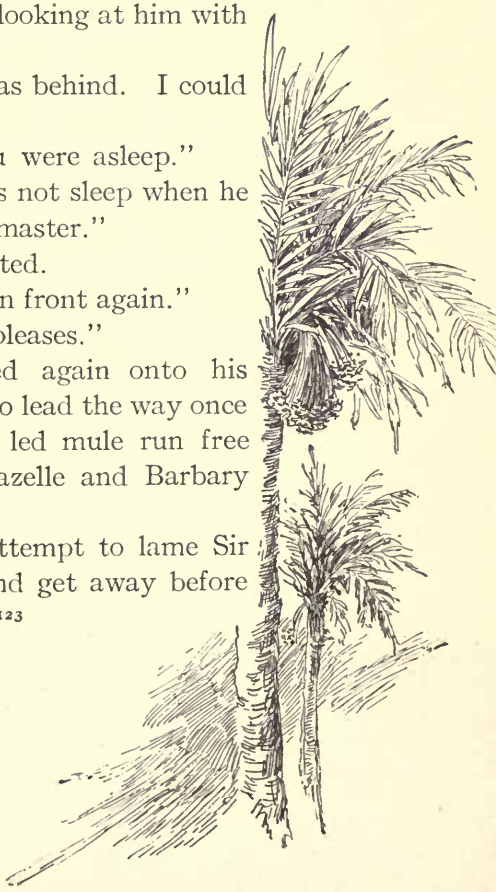
Sir Claude grunted.

"Now you get in front again."

"As monsieur pleases."

Achmed jumped again onto his mule, and began to lead the way once more, letting the led mule run free with its load of gazelle and Barbary sheep.

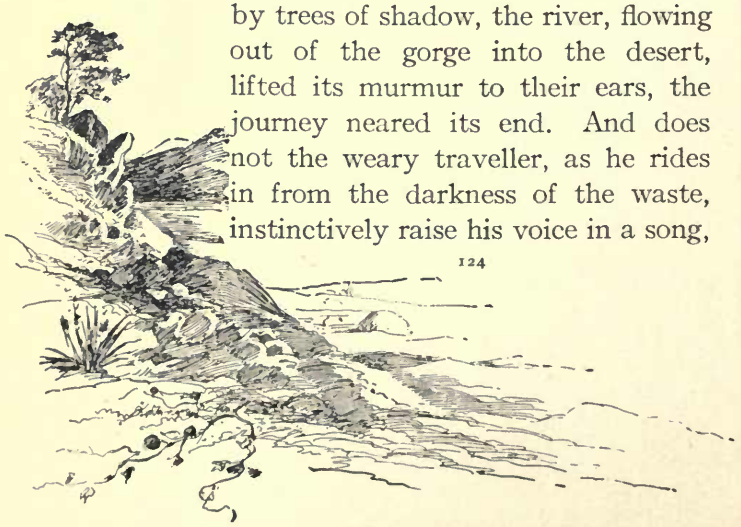
Foiled in his attempt to lame Sir Claude's beast, and get away before

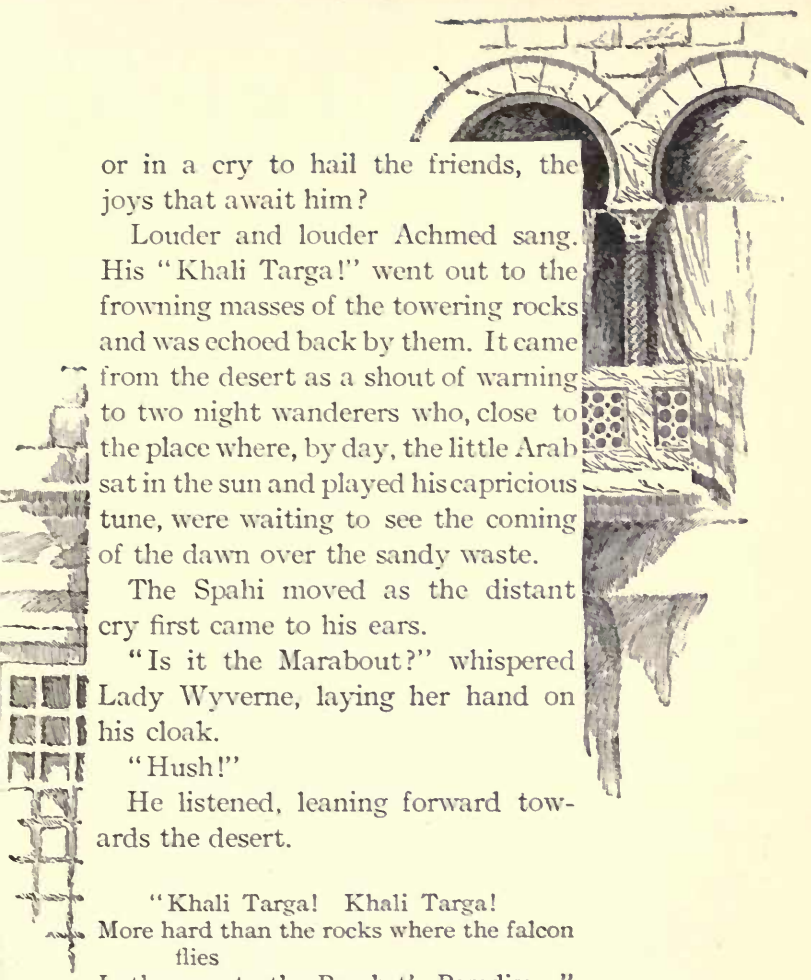


Sir Claude had time to notice the accident and call him back, he urged his mule on as fast as possible, and again began to sing at the top of his voice.

"Khali Targa! Khali Targa!
On the curving edge of the steel I have lain,
I have feared not the touch of the flickering pain;
Nor the sharp-toothed glass, nor the poisoned sting—
Now the lash, the lash to my bared loins bring!
Khali Targa! Khali Targa!"

This time Sir Claude did not interrupt him. For the three villages were at hand, houses of shadow kept by trees of shadow, the river, flowing out of the gorge into the desert, lifted its murmur to their ears, the journey neared its end. And does not the weary traveller, as he rides in from the darkness of the waste, instinctively raise his voice in a song,





or in a cry to hail the friends, the joys that await him?

Louder and louder Achmed sang. His "Khali Targa!" went out to the frowning masses of the towering rocks and was echoed back by them. It came from the desert as a shout of warning to two night wanderers who, close to the place where, by day, the little Arab sat in the sun and played his capricious tune, were waiting to see the coming of the dawn over the sandy waste.

The Spahi moved as the distant cry first came to his ears.

"Is it the Marabout?" whispered Lady Wyverne, laying her hand on his cloak.

"Hush!"

He listened, leaning forward towards the desert.

"Khali Targa! Khali Targa!
More hard than the rocks where the falcon flies
Is the way to the Prophet's Paradise—"



"It is the voice of Achmed!"

Lady Wyverne turned white.

"But—it can't be! Why, they are at the salt mountain, far away from here!"

"The lash on my loins has fallen like hail.
See! I offer my shaven head to the nail!
Khali Targa! Khali Targa!"

"It is Achmed! They are coming! Look! I see mules on the road!"

"Save me! Where am I to go?"

She sprang up wildly.

But he drew her down again.

"You can't get away now."

"But I must! I must be in the inn when my husband gets there. He'll go straight to my room!"

She struggled with him and began to sob hysterically.

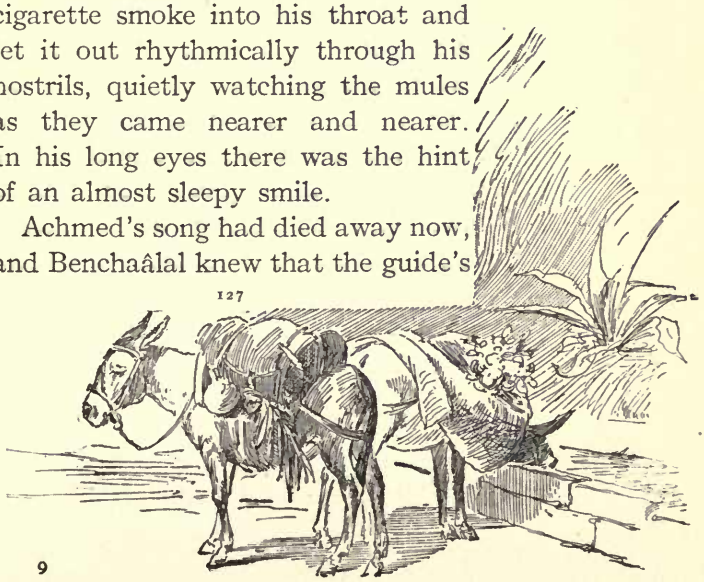
"Be quiet! Keep still!"

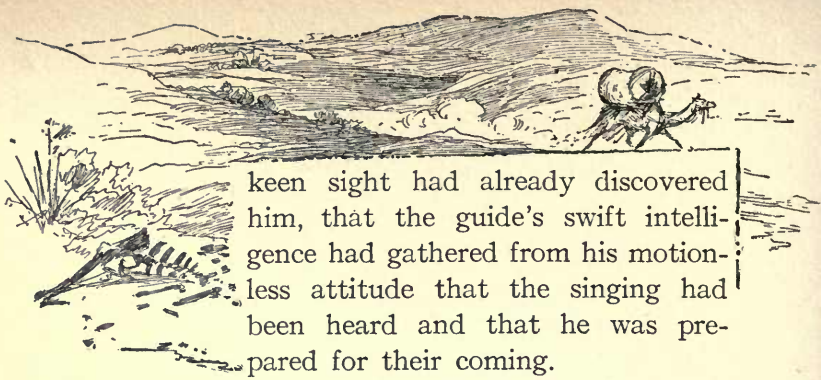
He said it quite gently. Yet she stopped at once and remained motionless, silent as one under the influence of an opiate.

"You can't get back. There's only one thing—slip behind the rock! Crouch down! I will let my burnous drop over you!"

Lady Wyverne crept to the back of the rock on which they had been seated and obeyed him. He lifted his great burnous, and replaced it loosely on his shoulders, letting it fall so that it concealed Lady Wyverne's head and shoulders. Her face was pressed against his back and his body felt her troubled breathing. Then he lit a cigarette. His attitude was nonchalant. His dark, keen face was perfectly calm. He drew the cigarette smoke into his throat and let it out rhythmically through his nostrils, quietly watching the mules as they came nearer and nearer. In his long eyes there was the hint of an almost sleepy smile.

Achmed's song had died away now, and Benchaâlal knew that the guide's





keen sight had already discovered him, that the guide's swift intelligence had gathered from his motionless attitude that the singing had been heard and that he was prepared for their coming.

Achmed's mule came up level with the Spahi and passed on. Achmed made no sign of recognition, but he looked at Benchaâlal steadily, then beyond him as if seeking for something. Benchaâlal leaned a little backward, letting his burnous drop lower over the crouching woman. And he felt that she shuddered against his body. The mule that bore the victims of Sir Claude's gun followed. Then came Sir Claude. As he drew up the first rays of the rising sun struck into the eastern sky and touched the houses of the red village upon its little hill. When Sir Claude saw the Spahi he started with surprise, and involuntarily pull-

ed up his mule. For a moment the two men stared at each other; the Englishman with a sort of hard inquiry and suspicion, the Arab with a sleepy languor that told nothing of what was passing in his mind. Always he drew the cigarette smoke into his throat, and let it out through his finely cut nostrils.

"Bonjour," said Sir Claude, at last, in the rough voice of a weary man.

"Bonjour, monsieur," said the Spahi, softly. "You have had good sport, I see."

The crouching woman was trembling violently. Benchaâlal leaned still farther back. He feared lest the rider should see the movement of the folds of his burnous, and secretly cursed the timidity of women.

"You are out early, monsieur," said Sir Claude.

"We Spahis are accustomed to

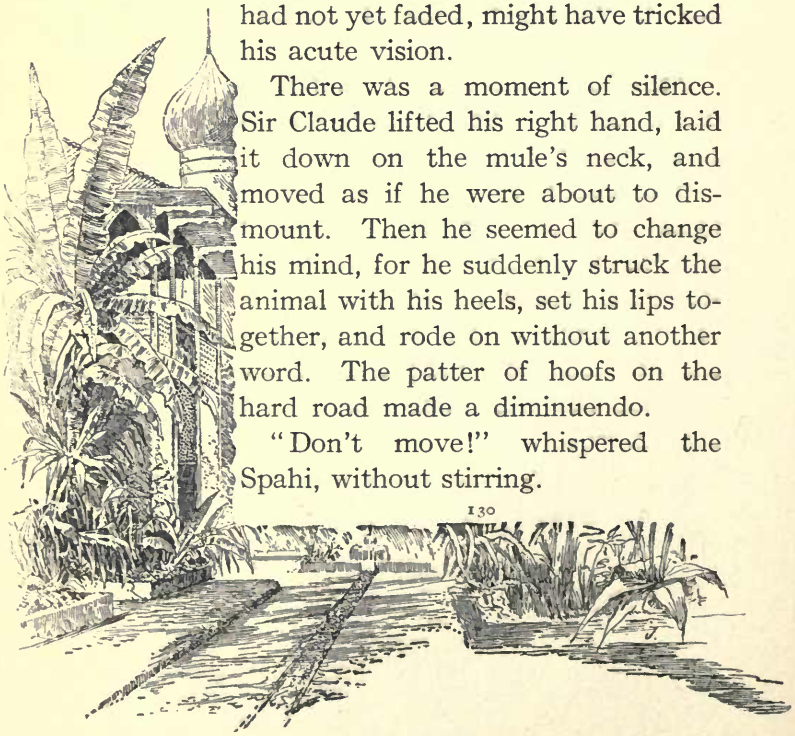


early rising, monsieur. I seldom sleep much after three o'clock. I like to see the sun come up over the desert."

He thought he saw Sir Claude's steady, strained eyes glance backward as Achmed's had done. But he was not sure. The smoke wreaths of his cigarette, curling up towards the pale sky, in which the last stars had not yet faded, might have tricked his acute vision.

There was a moment of silence. Sir Claude lifted his right hand, laid it down on the mule's neck, and moved as if he were about to dismount. Then he seemed to change his mind, for he suddenly struck the animal with his heels, set his lips together, and rode on without another word. The patter of hoofs on the hard road made a diminuendo.

"Don't move!" whispered the Spahi, without stirring.



The patter of hoofs died quite away.

"Not yet!" he said, aloud. "Not till I tell you."

He heard again the sound of convulsive, half-strangled sobbing. Yet even now his face did not change, even now he continued quietly to smoke.

The gorge took the little cavalcade. It was lost in the fastnesses of the rocks. Then the Spahi sprang up, lifted his cloak, and set free the terrified woman.

"Does he know? Did he see me?"

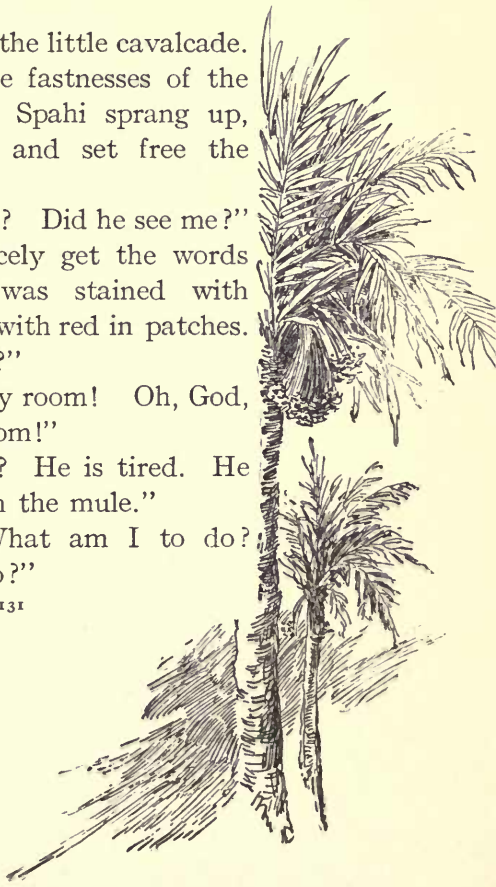
She could scarcely get the words out. Her face was stained with tears and flushed with red in patches.

"Who can tell?"

"He'll go to my room! Oh, God, he'll go to my room!"

"Who can tell? He is tired. He sits like a sack on the mule."

"He'll go! What am I to do? What am I to do?"



Benchaâlal stretched his arm out towards the spaces of the desert.

"Will you come with me—there?"

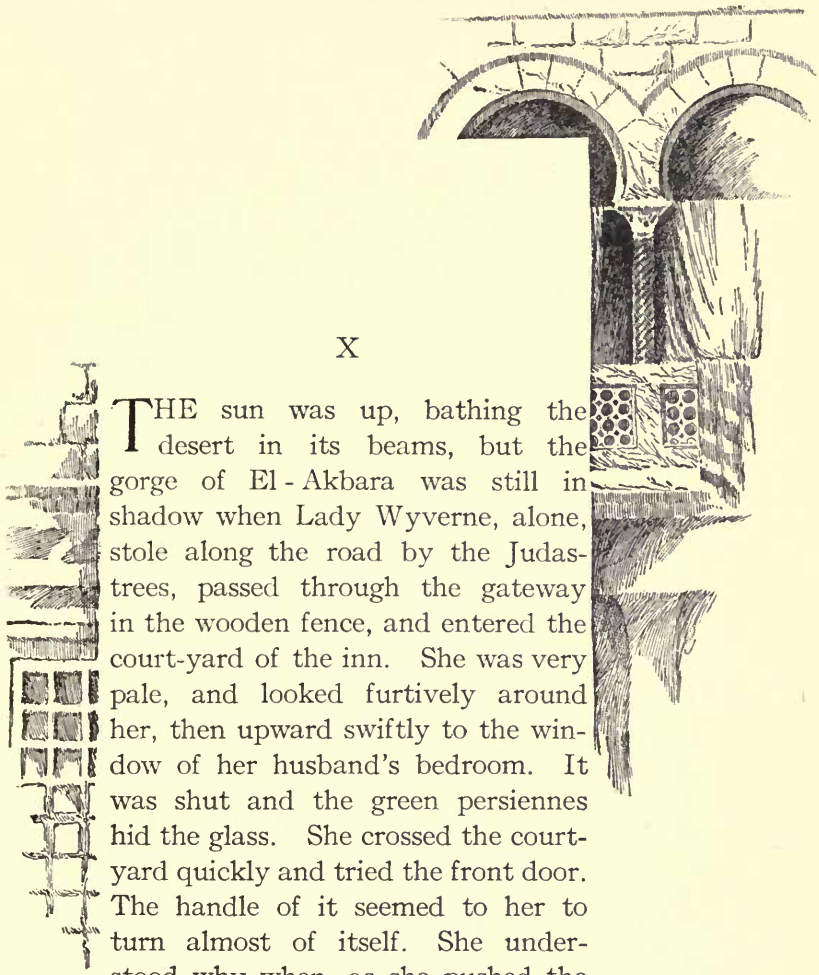
"He'll find my room empty! He'll come back!"

The Spahi looked at her for a moment. Then he said, coldly:

"Go and wash your face in the river, madame. And then we can speak together. At present it is useless."

Lady Wyverne stared for a moment, as if she did not comprehend what he had said. But the tears dried on her cheeks. And after an instant she turned from him obediently, went to the river-bank, and bent down over the running water.





X

THE sun was up, bathing the desert in its beams, but the gorge of El-Akbara was still in shadow when Lady Wyverne, alone, stole along the road by the Judas-trees, passed through the gateway in the wooden fence, and entered the court-yard of the inn. She was very pale, and looked furtively around her, then upward swiftly to the window of her husband's bedroom. It was shut and the green persiennes hid the glass. She crossed the court-yard quickly and tried the front door. The handle of it seemed to her to turn almost of itself. She understood why when, as she pushed the



door back, she saw Achmed standing in the aperture. He stared at her with his one eye, but said nothing, and she hurried past him softly, up the stairs, and into her bedroom.

She had dreaded finding Sir Claude there. But there was no one. She gently locked the door and sat down on the little chair by the bed.

Had her husband visited her room or not?

That was the vital question she was asking herself. He must have been terribly tired by his long ride across the desert and the day's hunting. He must have been longing to sleep. Nevertheless, knowing him as she did, she felt almost certain that he would not have gone to bed without trying her door. And she had left it unlocked when she went out to see the sunrise with Benchaâlal. She had been reckless, feeling perfectly safe

in the thought that Sir Claude was miles away.

Why had he come back?

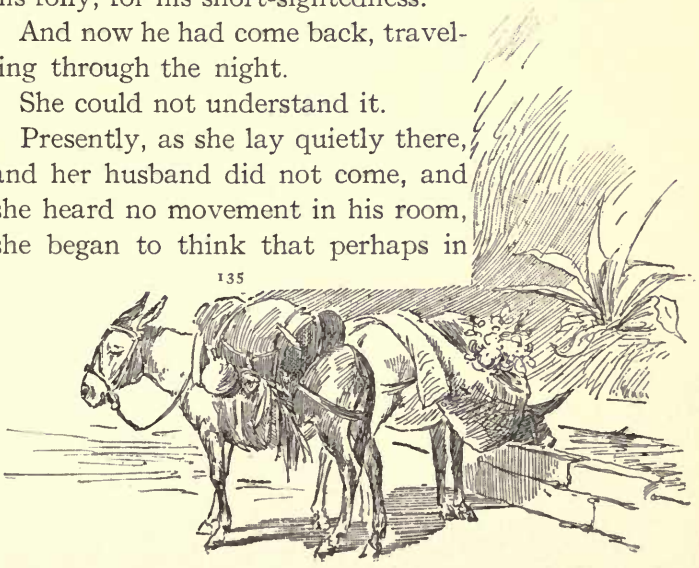
Mechanically she began to undress. Her hands trembled, and she was not accustomed to undressing herself; but at last she was ready for bed, and she stepped in and drew the clothes up to her chin.

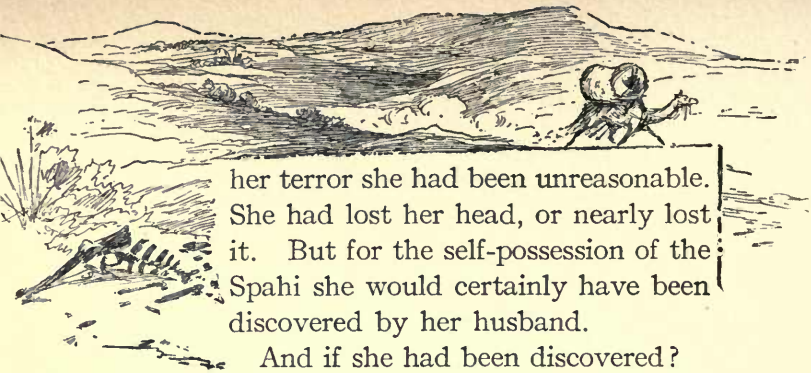
Why had he come back? It was his own idea to stay away all night. She had never suggested such a thing, had never even thought of it. When she had read the note telling her he was going to sleep out, she had been full of a sort of ironical pity for his folly, for his short-sightedness.

And now he had come back, travelling through the night.

She could not understand it.

Presently, as she lay quietly there, and her husband did not come, and she heard no movement in his room, she began to think that perhaps in





her terror she had been unreasonable. She had lost her head, or nearly lost it. But for the self-possession of the Spahi she would certainly have been discovered by her husband.

And if she had been discovered?

She tried to think of the situation calmly, without hysteria. If she had been discovered what would "Crumpet" have said, have done? If he knew anything now, what would he say or do?

She had always been accustomed to rule him. He had always given in to all her whims. They had often been foolish, but they had been innocent. She had flirted. Many men had made a sort of love to her. But it had been a very tame business. It had not been even a playing with fire. There had never been any fire to play with.

But where Benchaâlal was there was fire, there was always fire.

Sir Claude had never minded her

little flirtations. But he had felt sure of her. Somehow Lady Wyverne, never having really cared a straw for any of the men who had admired her, had never dreamed that Sir Claude could mind their attentions, even their occasional ardor. The ardor had always been English, and her own consciousness of her own coldness had preserved her from either fear or any sense of guilt.

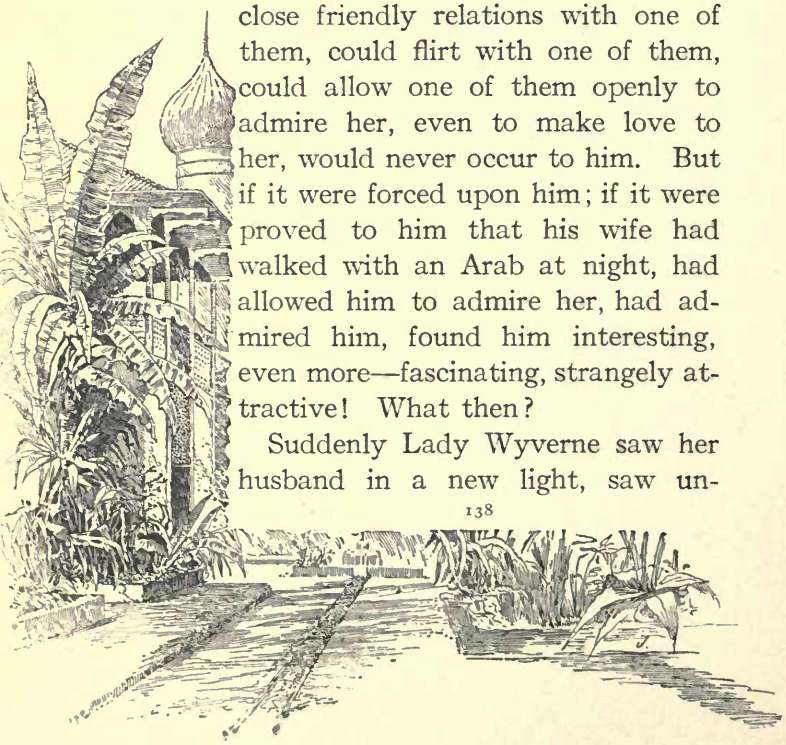
But now she was afraid, both of herself and of her husband. And she felt guilty, not because of any evil act that she had committed, but because of thoughts that had passed through her mind, of feelings that had stirred in her heart.

She knew her husband through and through, and she knew his intensely English nature. All, or nearly all, the prejudices of the average Englishman were his, cherished children of his not clever brain.



She divined how Sir Claude would inevitably think of Africans. Very much as the average American regards the nigger he would regard any African; whether Egyptian, Touareg, Kabyle, Arab, Negro, or Moor. They would be all the same to him—"blacks," or "damned blacks." Thus he would sum them up. The idea that his wife could enter into any close friendly relations with one of them, could flirt with one of them, could allow one of them openly to admire her, even to make love to her, would never occur to him. But if it were forced upon him; if it were proved to him that his wife had walked with an Arab at night, had allowed him to admire her, had admired him, found him interesting, even more—fascinating, strangely attractive! What then?

Suddenly Lady Wyverne saw her husband in a new light, saw un-



chained in him a new being. The Englishman is often slow to wake up, but when he does wake up he is not a man to trifle with. And Sir Claude was very primitive. At certain junctures in life the primitive man is the most dangerous, the most terrible of all men. He rushes ahead with the blindness of a machine.

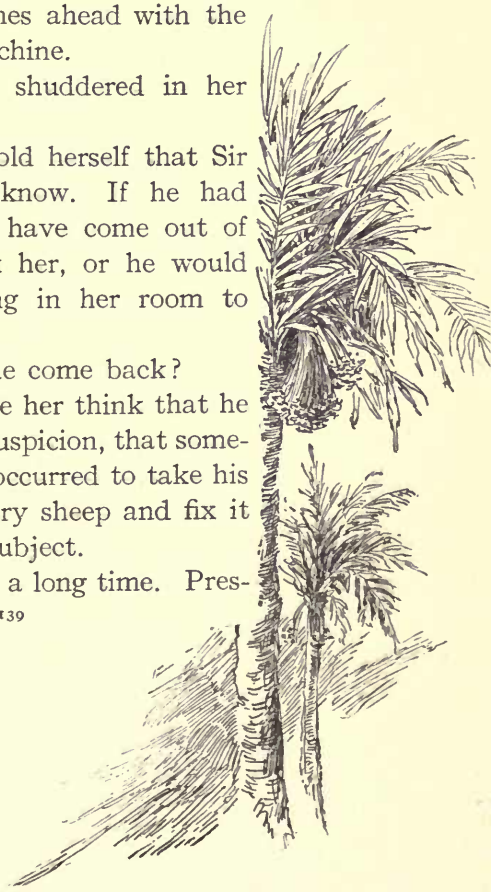
Lady Wyverne shuddered in her bed.

But then she told herself that Sir Claude did not know. If he had known he would have come out of the hotel to seek her, or he would have been waiting in her room to denounce her.

But why had he come back?

His return made her think that he must have some suspicion, that something must have occurred to take his mind from Barbary sheep and fix it upon a different subject.

She lay still for a long time. Pres-



ently she heard voices below. The Arab servants were about. Despite her closed shutters she realized that the sun-rays had reached the gorge. The day was come, the full day. And she must face it.

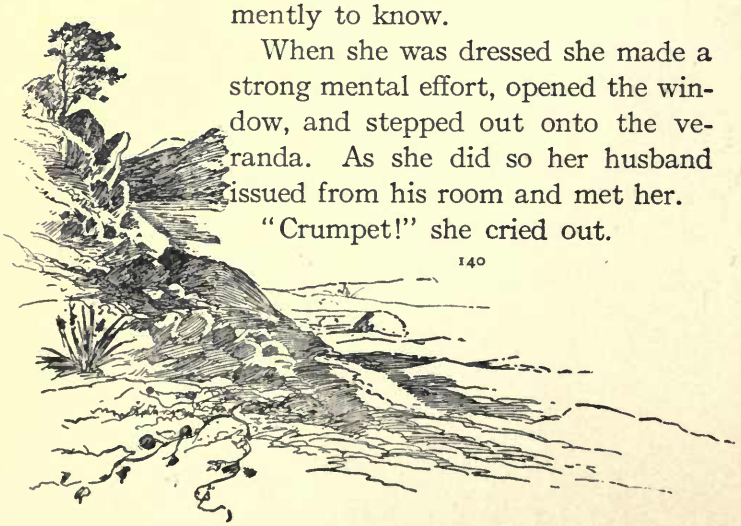
She looked at her watch. Eight o'clock. She got up, rang for hot water.

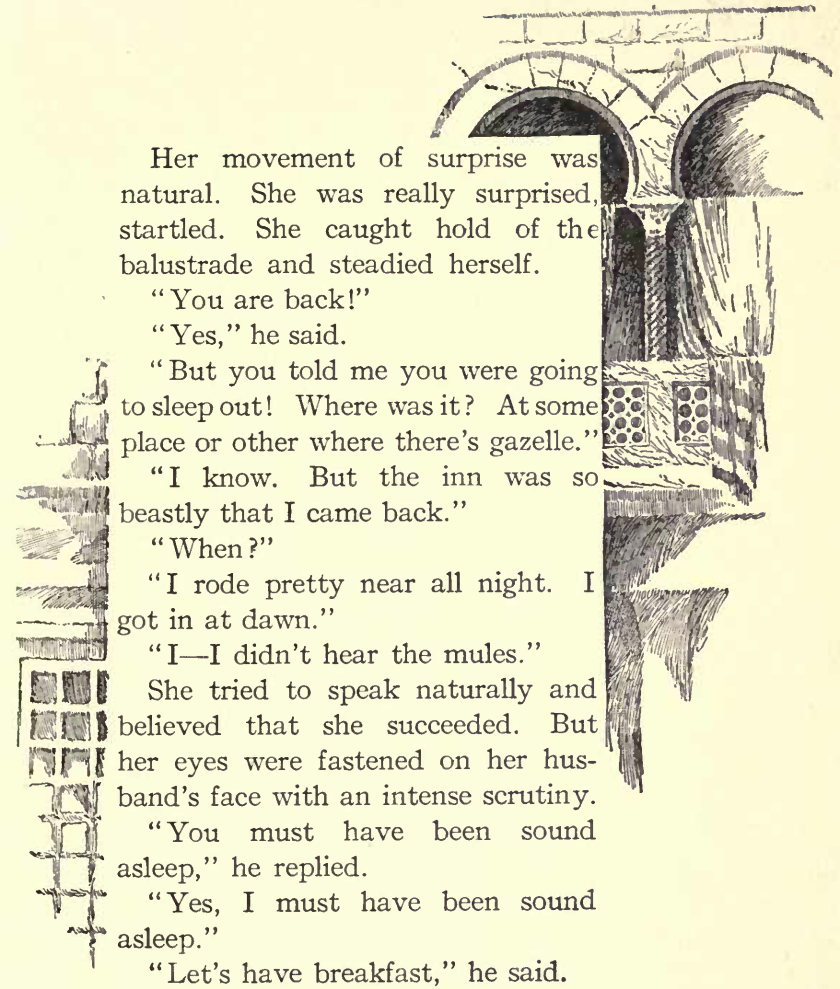
An Arab left it at her door with a loud single knock. When he had gone she opened the door and took it in. Her husband's door was shut. Was he in the hotel, or, having found her room empty, was he out seeking her?

She wondered. She longed vehemently to know.

When she was dressed she made a strong mental effort, opened the window, and stepped out onto the veranda. As she did so her husband issued from his room and met her.

"Crumpet!" she cried out.





Her movement of surprise was natural. She was really surprised, startled. She caught hold of the balustrade and steadied herself.

"You are back!"

"Yes," he said.

"But you told me you were going to sleep out! Where was it? At some place or other where there's gazelle."

"I know. But the inn was so beastly that I came back."

"When?"

"I rode pretty near all night. I got in at dawn."

"I—I didn't hear the mules."

She tried to speak naturally and believed that she succeeded. But her eyes were fastened on her husband's face with an intense scrutiny.

"You must have been sound asleep," he replied.

"Yes, I must have been sound asleep."

"Let's have breakfast," he said.



So he had not been to her room! For a moment her sense of relief was immense. She went nearer to him, intending to give him a kiss. But he happened to turn round just at the moment to look for one of the straw chairs they always sat in when they took breakfast or tea on the veranda. Evidently he had not noticed her movement. Or had he seen it and wished to—?

He found the chair, then leaned over the balustrade and shouted for breakfast.

"Are you tired?" Lady Wyverne said.

"Yes, a bit."

He tipped his chair back till two legs were off the floor, then let them drop, then tipped the chair back again.

"It was a longish ride."

"I—I wonder you didn't stay at the inn."

"It was beastly dirty."

She forced a laugh. Something in his manner made her uneasy. And then he had not kissed her. Nor had he once pronounced her name—Kitty. Generally it, or its abbreviation, "Kit," was forever on his lips.

"I didn't know you were afraid of roughing it," she said.

"Well, I don't see the good of being uncomfortable when one can be comfortable."

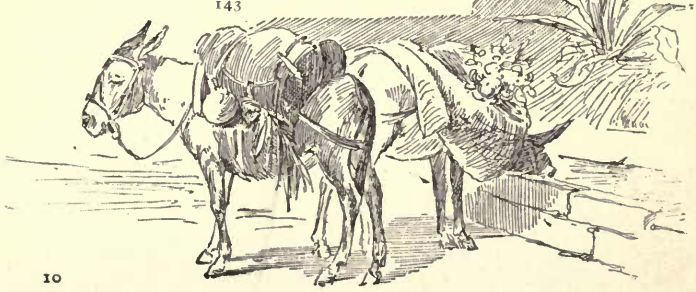
There was a pause.

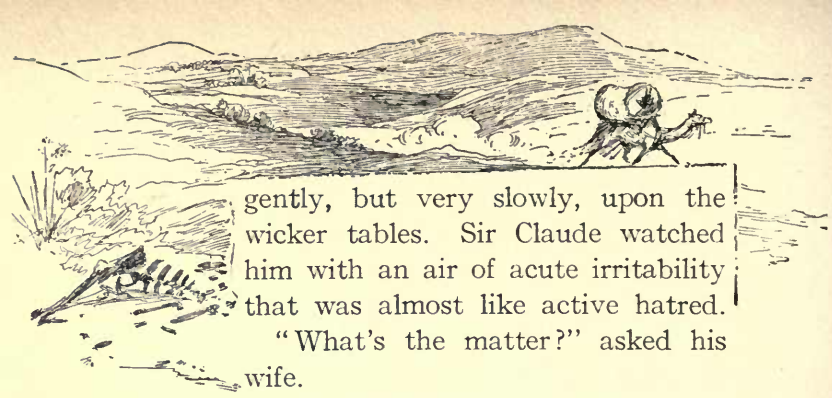
"No, of course not," she said.

He was still tipping the chair to and fro. The movement irritated her nerves. She looked away.

"Oh, here's breakfast!" she exclaimed.

The Arab who brought it was the same sleepy-looking boy who had accompanied Lady Wyverne on her excursion to the red village. He arranged the breakfast carefully and





gently, but very slowly, upon the wicker tables. Sir Claude watched him with an air of acute irritability that was almost like active hatred.

"What's the matter?" asked his wife.

"These infernal blacks—" he began. "There! There! That 'll do."

He suddenly leaned forward and pushed the boy roughly away from the table. The boy started, cast an angry look at him, and went off muttering to himself.

"I can't stand these fellers! Vermin!" said Sir Claude, with a sort of irrepressible passion.

Lady Wyverne said nothing. It was the first time her husband had ever behaved like this in her presence. She wondered whether he was only over-tired or whether there was another reason for his unusual conduct. His outburst against the Arabs made her tremble again at the thought of

her imprudence. She felt that the knowledge that his wife had coquetted—to use no other word—with an Arab surreptitiously would let loose upon her a new man, a man whom she had never known and of whom she would be terrified. But he could know nothing. If he did he would have spoken, have acted at once. "Crumpet" might be violent, even terrible. She realized that now. But surely he could never be subtle.

And yet she could not quite rid herself of uneasiness, of doubt. He had not kissed her. He had not yet called her by her name. And there was surely something aloof in his manner, a detachment from her that was unusual.

"What about to-day?" she asked, making a strong effort to seem lively and cheerful. "Are we going on to Beni-Mora?"

He busied himself with an egg,



carefully chipping the shell away from the white.

"D' you want to go?" he asked. "I wonder if this egg's fresh."

"Oh, they always are here!"

"Dessay it's all right. D' you want to go?"

"Well, I"—she shot a glance at him—"I don't mind. But—haven't you had enough of Barbary sheep by this time?"

"If you're bored to death we'll go, but if not I think I should like to have just one more shot at something."

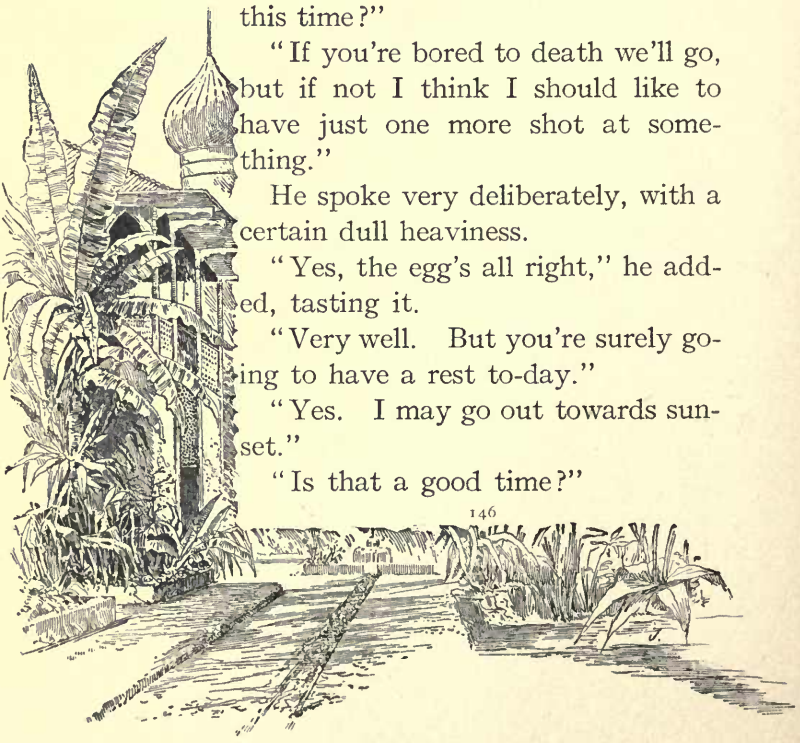
He spoke very deliberately, with a certain dull heaviness.

"Yes, the egg's all right," he added, tasting it.

"Very well. But you're surely going to have a rest to-day."

"Yes. I may go out towards sunset."

"Is that a good time?"



"I may sleep out."

Lady Wyverne started.

"Well, but if you can't stand the inns!"

"I may take a tent. They've got one here."

"Oh—won't it be cold?"

"Take plenty of blankets and you're all right."

"Very well," she said.

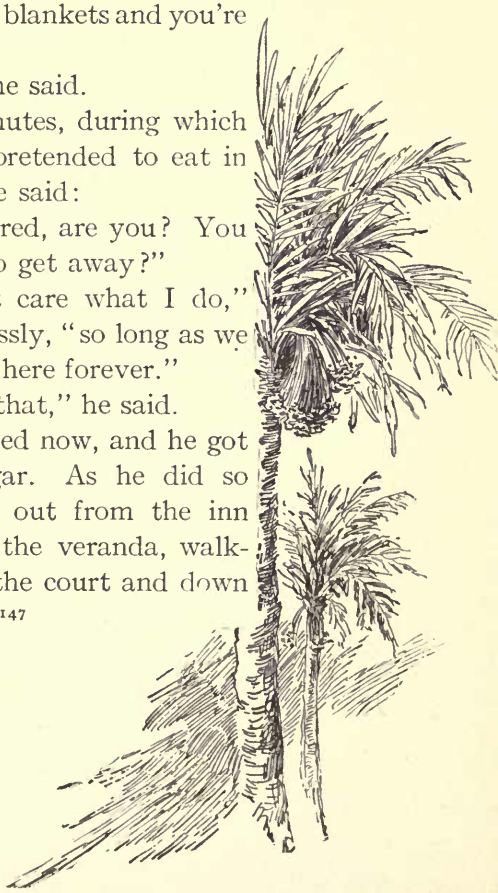
After some minutes, during which he ate and she pretended to eat in silence, Sir Claude said:

"You're not bored, are you? You don't still want to get away?"

"I really don't care what I do," she replied, carelessly, "so long as we don't settle down here forever."

"We won't do that," he said.

They had finished now, and he got up and lit a cigar. As he did so Benchaâlal came out from the inn door underneath the veranda, walked slowly across the court and down



the road towards the desert. He had on his scarlet cloak, which floated out majestically as he walked. He did not glance up at them. His dark face was very calm and tranquil, and he looked like a man perfectly contented with himself and all the world. Lady Wyverne only glanced at him, but Sir Claude watched him until he was lost to sight at a bend in the road.

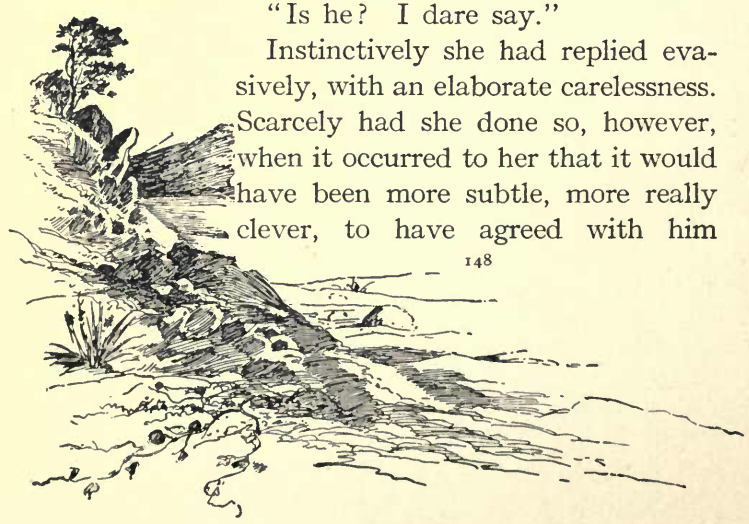
"That's a fine looking chap!" he said.

"I think the Arabs are a handsome set," Lady Wyverne answered.

"But he's the most striking of the lot. Don't you think so?"

"Is he? I dare say."

Instinctively she had replied evasively, with an elaborate carelessness. Scarcely had she done so, however, when it occurred to her that it would have been more subtle, more really clever, to have agreed with him



heartily. She was always accustomed to speak her thoughts, to express her whims frankly before Crumpet. She had often openly raved to him about other men's looks. It would have seemed far more natural, far more like herself, to do so now. But it was too late. Besides, she could not.

"I spoke to the feller this morning," resumed Sir Claude, leaning on the balustrade in an easy attitude and puffing wreaths of smoke away into the sun.

"This morning!" Lady Wyverne exclaimed, with a careful intonation of astonishment. "When?"

Sir Claude took his cigar from his mouth and smoothed the leaf at the end with his finger.

"When I was riding in."

"He—he was up already at that hour?"

She felt like an actress at a re-



hearsal, and wondered if she had got her tone just right.

"He was out in the desert, sitting on a rock near the river. You know that rock where we heard that boy playing—the first day."

"Oh yes. What an extraordinary man! What was he doing there? Meditating on eternity!"

She gave a little, high-pitched laugh.

"I don't know what he was doing. He was just sitting there wrapped up in one of those big cloaks. You know the things?"

"Yes—I know."

"We had a few words together. He seems a decent sort of chap."

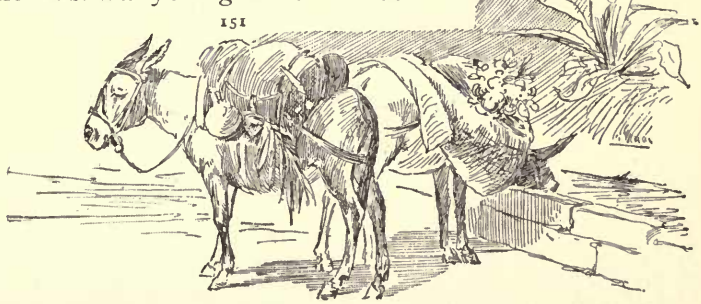
At this moment a sudden impulse seized Lady Wyverne to tell her husband — not all, certainly not that, but something; that she had spoken to the Spahi, that they had strolled together up and down in front of the inn—once; something of that kind.

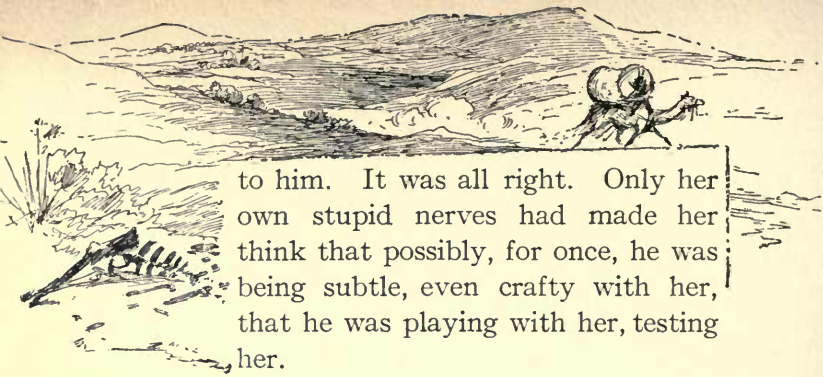
She was in the dark. She could not divine whether Sir Claude knew or suspected something, or whether he was talking in complete ignorance. For once her husband was a puzzle to her, and she began to respect him. She began to respect him but she longed to read him, to make sure. And she longed to "play for safety," ingeniously.

"Oh, I should think he must be quite well educated," she began. "He's an officer. At least, I think some one said so, didn't they?"

"Ah."

That was all Sir Claude said in reply, but it made Lady Wyverne abruptly aware that she could not tell him anything. It was impossible. He would never understand. She said to herself that he certainly knew nothing, suspected nothing. She would be a fool to "give herself away." Crumpet never saw anything unless it was shown





to him. It was all right. Only her own stupid nerves had made her think that possibly, for once, he was being subtle, even crafty with her, that he was playing with her, testing her.

"Well, what are you going to do this morning?" she exclaimed, briskly, getting up from her chair.

"I shall go down and see about the tent for to-night."

"Then you've quite decided now?"

"Yes," he said. "I've quite decided now."

"Very well. I'll go and write some letters."

She went away to her room. When she was there she heard her husband's heavy footstep descending the wooden staircase.

And she had an odd fancy that it sounded much heavier than usual.

But of course he was tired after being up all night.

All the morning Lady Wyverne wrote, or pretended to write, letters. She lunched alone. Sir Claude had gone up to his room to have a good sleep, and had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. In the afternoon she sat alone on the veranda reading a novel. She had not seen Benchaâlal again. But she had seen Achmed go down the road towards the villages. He returned about half-past one, and at half-past two Sir Claude emerged from his room dressed for hunting.

"Have you had a good sleep?" she asked.

"I'm all right," he replied. "As fit as a fiddle."

"Are you off already?"

"I believe so. If Achmed's got everything onto the mules."

"I must come down to see you start."



"Oh, don't you bother. You can see us from up here."

"What time will you be back to-morrow?"

"I don't know. Depends on the sport. I shall sleep out and go after the sheep at dawn."

"Good-bye, old boy," she said.

She put her face up suddenly to his and kissed him.

"Achmed!" he shouted out, harshly. "Are you ready?"

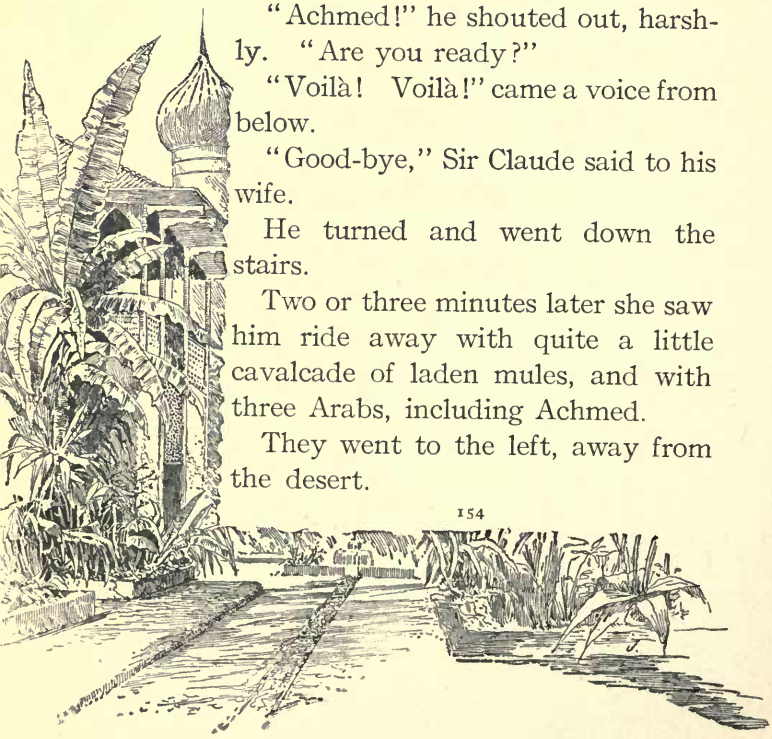
"Voilà! Voilà!" came a voice from below.

"Good-bye," Sir Claude said to his wife.

He turned and went down the stairs.

Two or three minutes later she saw him ride away with quite a little cavalcade of laden mules, and with three Arabs, including Achmed.

They went to the left, away from the desert.



Sir Claude and Achmed rode side by side behind the others.

They seemed to be talking together with some animation — doubtless about Barbary sheep.

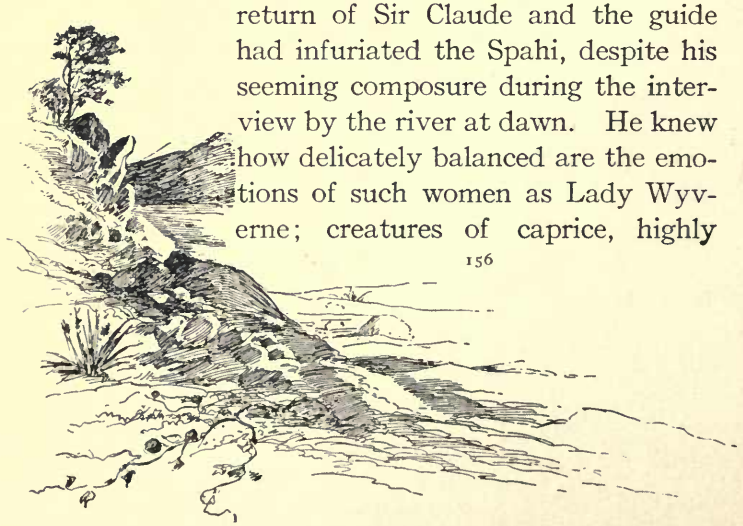


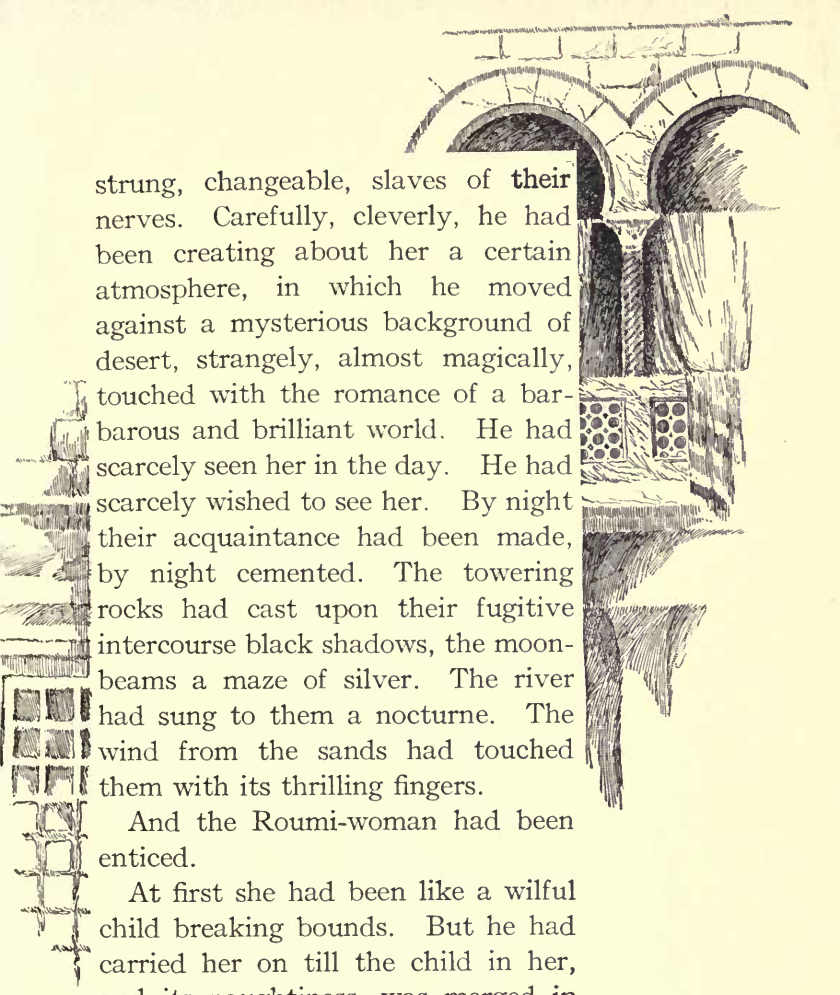
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XI

AMONG the palm-trees near the red village that day there had been a violent scene between Benchaâlal and Achmed. The guide was in the Spahi's pay, and had been promised a sum of money if he would persuade Sir Claude to spend a night at the salt mountain.

This sum of money Benchaâlal had refused to give him. The abrupt return of Sir Claude and the guide had infuriated the Spahi, despite his seeming composure during the interview by the river at dawn. He knew how delicately balanced are the emotions of such women as Lady Wyverne; creatures of caprice, highly





strung, changeable, slaves of their nerves. Carefully, cleverly, he had been creating about her a certain atmosphere, in which he moved against a mysterious background of desert, strangely, almost magically, touched with the romance of a barbarous and brilliant world. He had scarcely seen her in the day. He had scarcely wished to see her. By night their acquaintance had been made, by night cemented. The towering rocks had cast upon their fugitive intercourse black shadows, the moonbeams a maze of silver. The river had sung to them a nocturne. The wind from the sands had touched them with its thrilling fingers.

And the Roumi-woman had been enticed.

At first she had been like a wilful child breaking bounds. But he had carried her on till the child in her, and its naughtiness, was merged in



the very curious woman; and on again till the curious woman became the dreaming woman, the woman with wonder in her eyes. Just once he had shown himself in sunlight, and that almost meretriciously; with a crudeness of physical strength and determination, with a swiftness of skill, with a certain fierceness that was akin to the blinding sunshine. And then again he had stepped back into the darkness and called again out of the night.

And the Roumi-woman had been drawn on, like the child by the Celestial's pigtail in the story, and had come very near to the hidden chamber where the desire of her lay in wait.

Trampling upon this delicate fabric, which the Spahi had woven thread by thread, had come the hoofs of the mules.

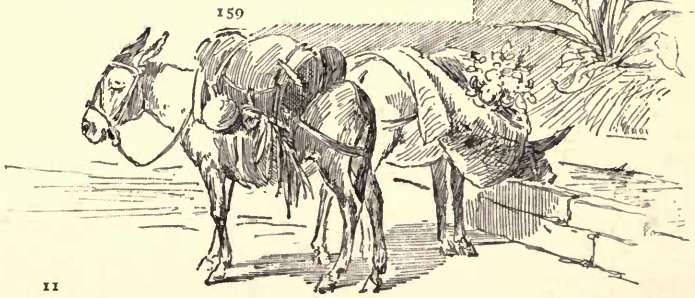
And Benchaâlal cursed Achmed

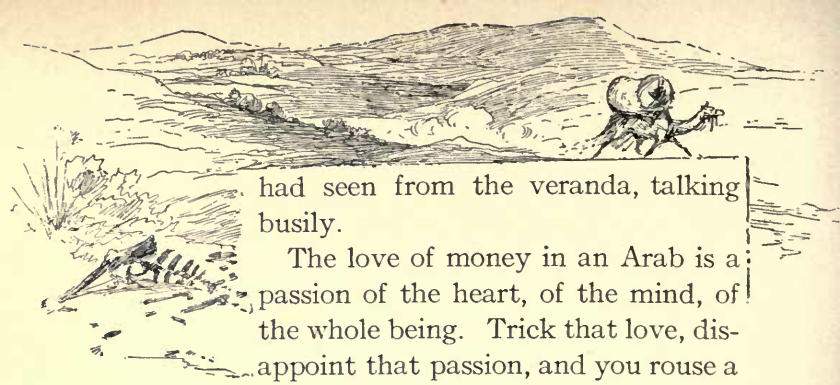
and refused to give him a sou of the promised money.

Lady Wyverne's terror was his foe. He felt sure of that. After the humiliation by the river's bank, when she had cowered for the first time in hiding, she would be set free from her dream. That was certain. Fantasy had been struck upon by the iron hammer of fact. And now the Spahi could not answer for the Roumi-woman.

So he was furious, and he let loose his fury upon Achmed as only an Arab can.

From their altercation Achmed had gone hot-foot to join Sir Claude on his camping-out expedition. Although not long before he had been livid with anger, half crazy with baffled greed, he was now apparently not merely calm but lively. He rode off beside his employer with a smiling face and, as Lady Wyverne





had seen from the veranda, talking busily.

The love of money in an Arab is a passion of the heart, of the mind, of the whole being. Trick that love, disappoint that passion, and you rouse a demon that is curiously subtle, that is persistent and revengeful, and entirely without scruple. Benchaâlal knew that, but he had been careless in his fury. For a moment he had run mad. That moment had given Achmed over to Sir Claude.

Till they rode away together that afternoon Sir Claude and Achmed had remained coldly master and servant. The Arab had seen Benchaâlal's burnous move when they came upon him by the river, and had divined the truth. But he had said nothing, showed nothing. Whether Sir Claude had seen what he had seen he did not know. They had ridden on in silence to the inn. At the door Sir Claude

had dismounted without words, and had gone straight up-stairs. And Achmed had not followed him, but had remained below to watch for the return of the Spahi, for the return, perhaps, of another. And he had not waited in vain. When Lady Wyverne tried the door he had been there. Then he had gone to the stables, had thrown himself down and slept. Later Sir Claude had told him to prepare for a second nocturnal expedition. And now they were off.

Did his master know? He tried to read him with his one eye, as he talked of Barbary sheep. The hundred francs, spoken of near the salt mountain, must be in his pocket to-morrow, those and many others, enough to make him forget the lost money of the Spahi. His whole being was alive with determination to recoup himself. But when he looked at Sir Claude's hard face he



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knew he must be wary. For even the Englishman, who lets his women go unveiled, does not love to hear their names befouled by the lips of strangers.

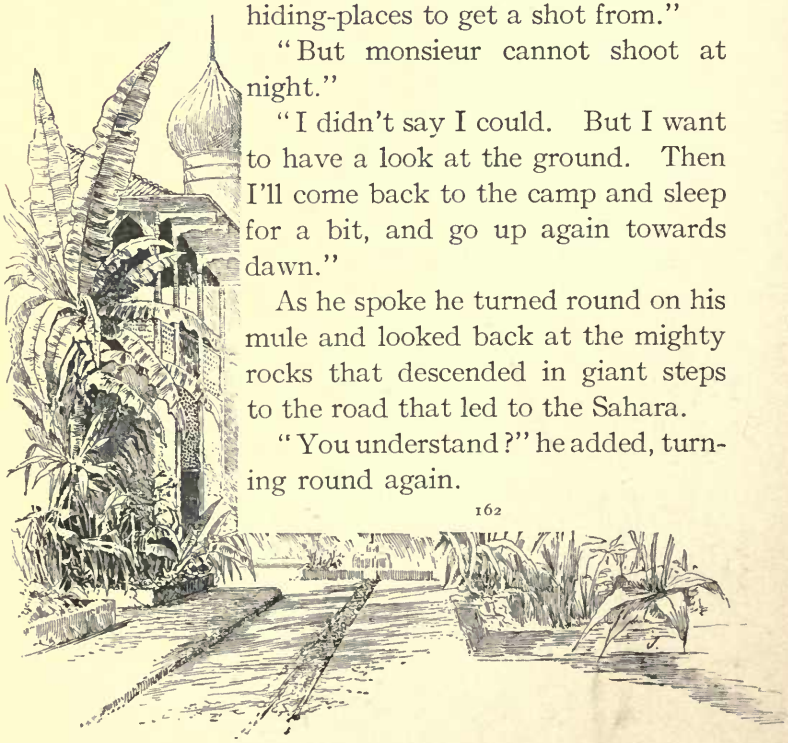
"Look here, Achmed," said Sir Claude, presently, "I want you to take me up into the mountain above El-Akbara to-night. The whole place is one mass of rocks, and full of good hiding-places to get a shot from."

"But monsieur cannot shoot at night."

"I didn't say I could. But I want to have a look at the ground. Then I'll come back to the camp and sleep for a bit, and go up again towards dawn."

As he spoke he turned round on his mule and looked back at the mighty rocks that descended in giant steps to the road that led to the Sahara.

"You understand?" he added, turning round again.



"Monsieur wishes to go up there, near the gorge?"

Sir Claude looked sharply at the Arab.

"Yes," he said, after a slight hesitation.

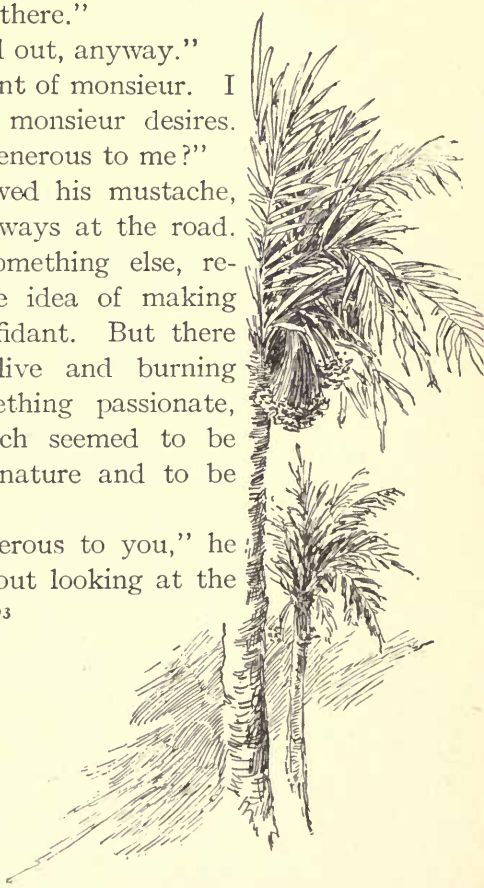
"I do not know if there will be Barbary sheep up there."

"I intend to find out, anyway."

"I am the servant of monsieur. I will do whatever monsieur desires. Monsieur will be generous to me?"

Sir Claude gnawed his mustache, looking down sideways at the road. His pride, and something else, revolted against the idea of making the guide his confidant. But there was something alive and burning within him, something passionate, even furious, which seemed to be fighting his own nature and to be subduing it.

"I shall be generous to you," he said, at last, without looking at the



Arab. "If you do exactly what I want—and don't talk."

Achmed put his finger to his lips.

"Monsieur has only to tell me," he said, softly.

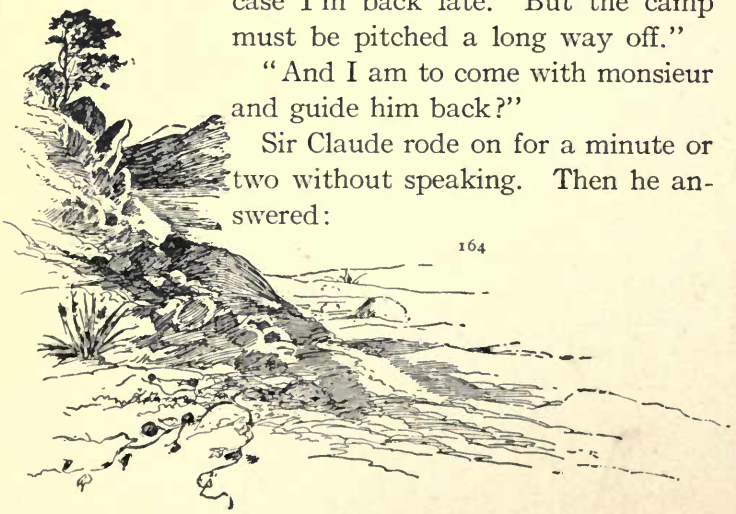
"I don't want those fellows to know where I'm going to-night," Sir Claude said. "I want the camp pitched a good way out, but so that I can get to the mountain at the left of the road on the edge of the desert, the mountain that rises out of the gorge, where all those rocks are."

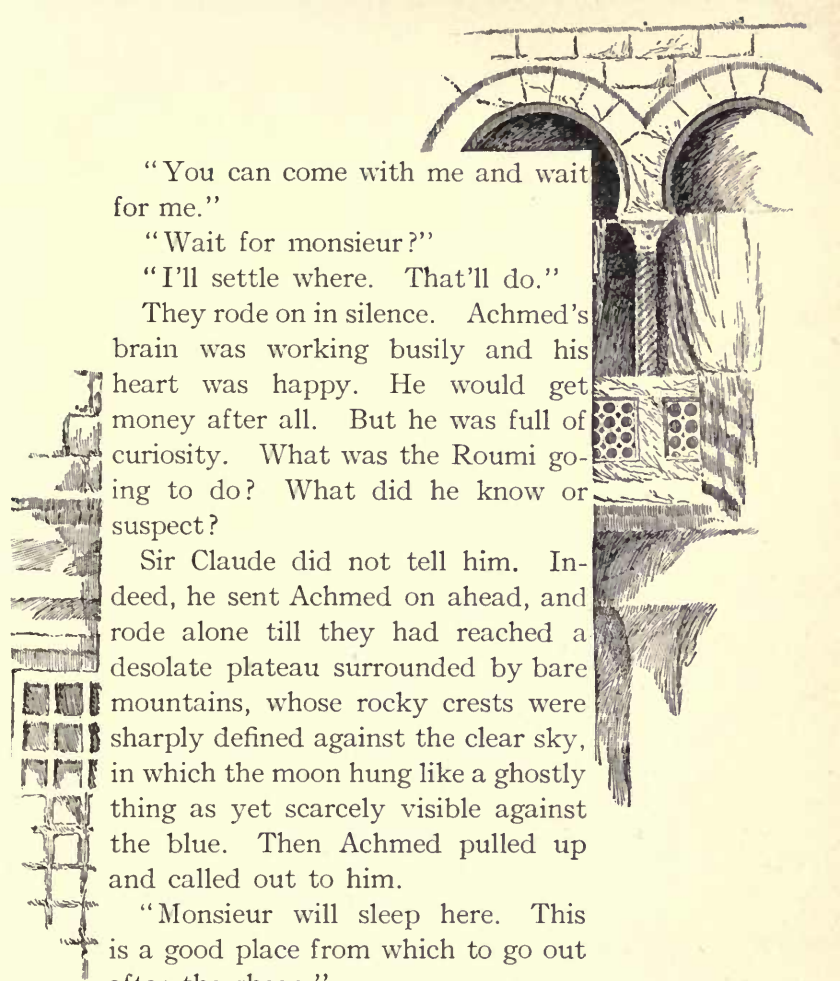
"And when does monsieur wish to be on the mountain?"

"I wish to be there towards sunset. I shall take some food with me in case I'm back late. But the camp must be pitched a long way off."

"And I am to come with monsieur and guide him back?"

Sir Claude rode on for a minute or two without speaking. Then he answered:





"You can come with me and wait for me."

"Wait for monsieur?"

"I'll settle where. That'll do."

They rode on in silence. Achmed's brain was working busily and his heart was happy. He would get money after all. But he was full of curiosity. What was the Roumi going to do? What did he know or suspect?

Sir Claude did not tell him. Indeed, he sent Achmed on ahead, and rode alone till they had reached a desolate plateau surrounded by bare mountains, whose rocky crests were sharply defined against the clear sky, in which the moon hung like a ghostly thing as yet scarcely visible against the blue. Then Achmed pulled up and called out to him.

"Monsieur will sleep here. This is a good place from which to go out after the sheep."



"All right," said Sir Claude.

He swung himself off his mule, and walked up and down while the men put up the tent and picketed the beasts. He felt desperately lonely, almost as he had long years ago when he went to a public school for the first time, and cold—cold through all his body. Only his head was burning and his temples were throbbing. As he walked he stared at the mountains that encircled him, monstrous, cruel-looking shapes. He was not imaginative, but to-day they impressed him powerfully, almost terribly, and he remembered—again going back to his boyhood—how once as a child he had been left alone in the drawing-room on a dark, wet day, and had turned over the leaves of a great, red book which contained pictures of the circles of hell. In those pictures there were mountains like these, and hideous ravines guard-

ed by rocks like gigantic teeth. And among the mountains and in the ravines the souls of the lost were imprisoned.

It seemed to him then that the little boy in the drawing-room had seen in the book prophetic pictures, and he shivered.

The Arabs began to sing as they worked. One of them wailed in a plaintive voice for two or three minutes. Then the others sang in chorus. Then the first voice wailed again alone.

Presently the tent was up, and Achmed came to him smiling and carrying the guns.

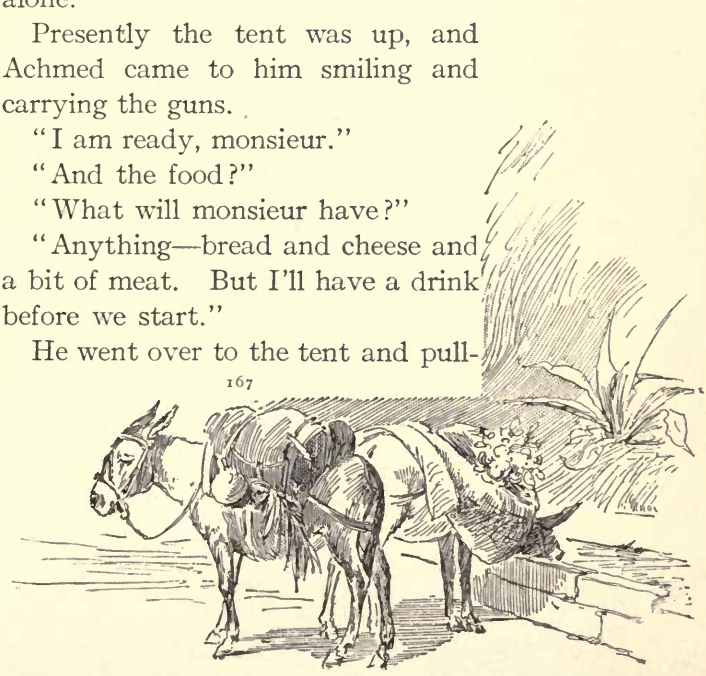
"I am ready, monsieur."

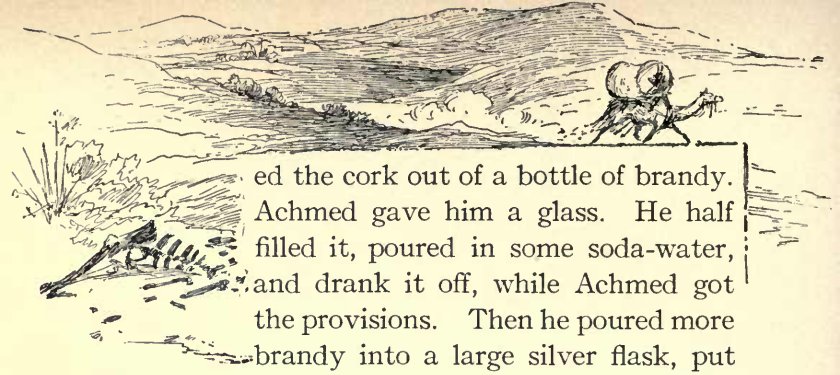
"And the food?"

"What will monsieur have?"

"Anything—bread and cheese and a bit of meat. But I'll have a drink before we start."

He went over to the tent and pull-





ed the cork out of a bottle of brandy. Achmed gave him a glass. He half filled it, poured in some soda-water, and drank it off, while Achmed got the provisions. Then he poured more brandy into a large silver flask, put it into his pocket, and mounted a mule. Achmed was going to walk. They set off together and soon lost sight of the camp.

Achmed walked in front at first to show the way, but presently he dropped back and kept by the side of the mule. He wanted to talk, to satisfy his curiosity. He was not shy. No desert Arab is. But when he glanced up at Sir Claude an uneasiness took possession of him. The Roumi looked different, like a changed man, changed even in feature.

It was Sir Claude who spoke first.

"You know what I want," he said, roughly. "I want you to take me to the mountain above the gorge, to a

place from which I can get down among the rocks, get down as low as I like, right down if I wish to."

"Monsieur, it is not easy."

"That don't matter. Have you ever done it?"

"Monsieur, I can go wherever a goat can go. But I go with naked feet."

"Where you can get down, I can."

"I will show monsieur a place. If monsieur goes where I show him, monsieur could get down to near the rock where Benchaâlal sat when we passed by this morning."

"That's it."

"If Benchaâlal should be there to-night, he would be surprised to see monsieur."

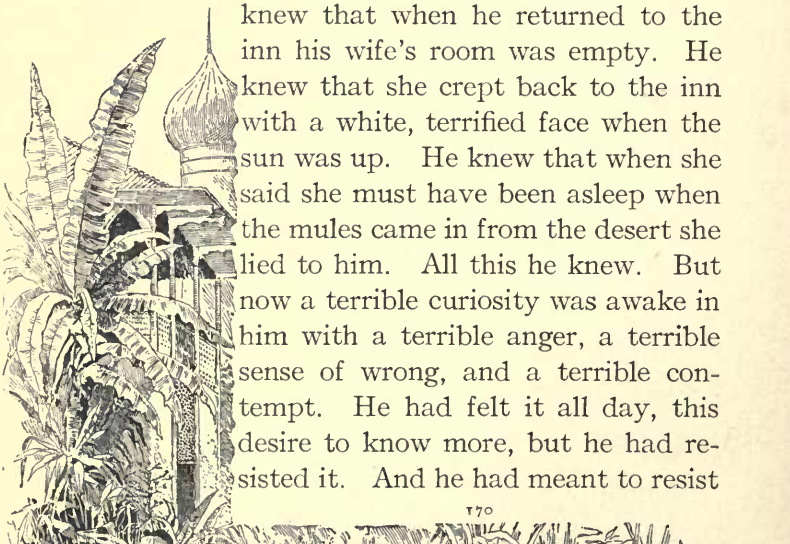
There was a vicious sound in the Arab's soft voice.

"Why should Benchaâlal be there to-night?" said Sir Claude, fiercely. "What do you mean?"



"Nothing, monsieur. Only—only Benchaâlal often goes into the desert by night. But monsieur is in bed—monsieur sleeps and does not see him go."

A deep flush of red went over Sir Claude's brown face. He realized in that moment that this Arab knew much more, certainly, than he did. And yet he knew enough, surely! He knew that when he returned to the inn his wife's room was empty. He knew that she crept back to the inn with a white, terrified face when the sun was up. He knew that when she said she must have been asleep when the mules came in from the desert she lied to him. All this he knew. But now a terrible curiosity was awake in him with a terrible anger, a terrible sense of wrong, and a terrible contempt. He had felt it all day, this desire to know more, but he had resisted it. And he had meant to resist



it always. He had meant to — but now!

"Achmed," he said, staring straight before him between the mules' ears at the stony track.

"Monsieur."

"Why should — why should Benchaâlal go into the desert at night alone? What does he go for? Has he friends in the village?"

"Monsieur, he has friends. But he does not go to the village."

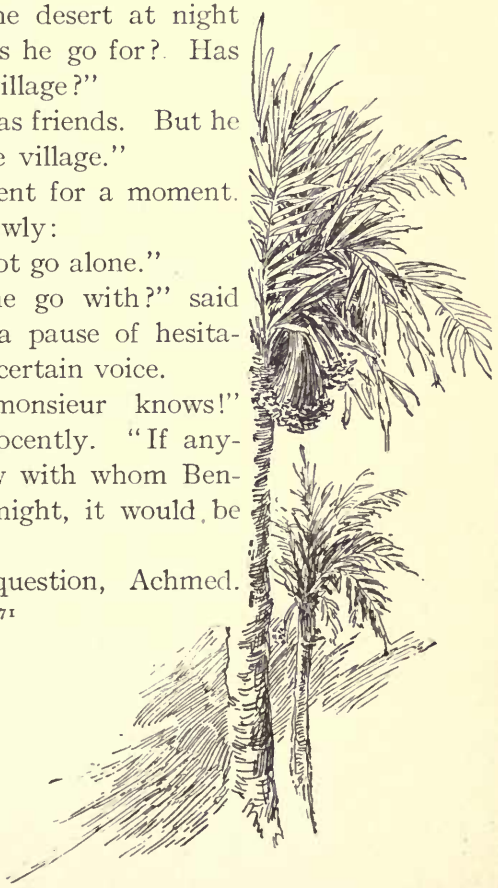
Achmed was silent for a moment. Then he added, slowly:

"And he does not go alone."

"Whom does he go with?" said Sir Claude, after a pause of hesitation, and in an uncertain voice.

"But surely monsieur knows!" Achmed said, innocently. "If anybody should know with whom Benchaâlal walks at night, it would be monsieur."

"Answer my question, Achmed.



It does not matter—what I know. You answer my question."

"Benchaâlal walks at night with madame,"

"You're a damned liar!"

Achmed said nothing. But he withdrew a pace or two from the mule. He did not look angry. Being called a liar did not distress him at all. Every human being was a liar, he supposed. And why not? Still, he had told the truth this time. The Roumi was a fool not to believe him.

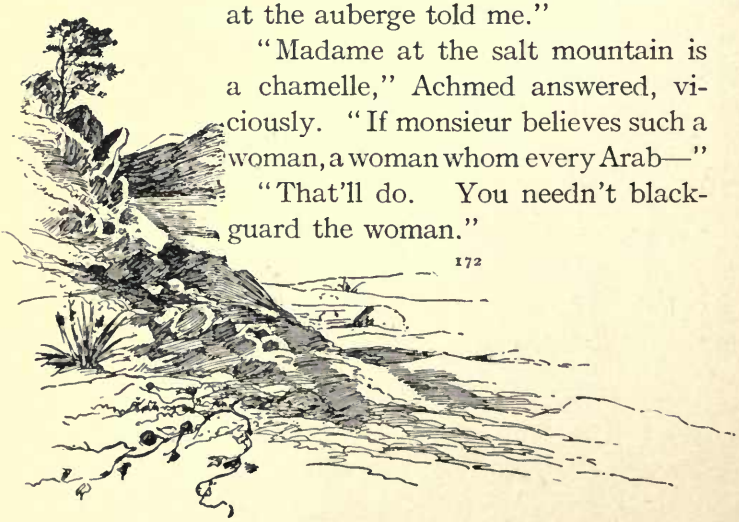
"D' you hear?" Sir Claude said, fiercely.

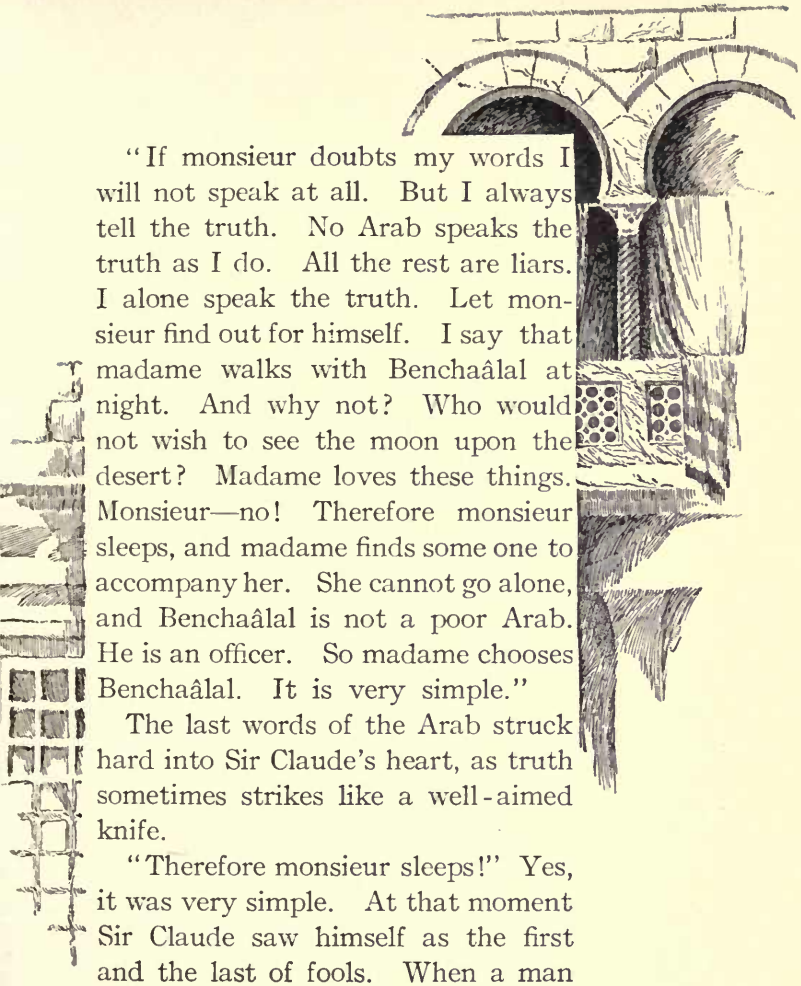
"I hear, monsieur."

"I know all about you. Madame at the auberge told me."

"Madame at the salt mountain is a chamelle," Achmed answered, viciously. "If monsieur believes such a woman, a woman whom every Arab—"

"That'll do. You needn't blackguard the woman."





"If monsieur doubts my words I will not speak at all. But I always tell the truth. No Arab speaks the truth as I do. All the rest are liars. I alone speak the truth. Let monsieur find out for himself. I say that madame walks with Benchaâlal at night. And why not? Who would not wish to see the moon upon the desert? Madame loves these things. Monsieur—no! Therefore monsieur sleeps, and madame finds some one to accompany her. She cannot go alone, and Benchaâlal is not a poor Arab. He is an officer. So madame chooses Benchaâlal. It is very simple."

The last words of the Arab struck hard into Sir Claude's heart, as truth sometimes strikes like a well-aimed knife.

"Therefore monsieur sleeps!" Yes, it was very simple. At that moment Sir Claude saw himself as the first and the last of fools. When a man



has such a vision of himself, if he is really a man the momentary crumbling of all his self-respect is succeeded by a desire that seems made of granite — the desire to reinstate himself upon his seat, his throne of manhood. At whatever cost he must do that, at whatever cost of suffering, of terror even, perhaps of crime.

"Where are we?"

Achmed stretched out his arm.

"Monsieur sees that rock there, to the south, shaped like a resting camel?"

"I see it."

"From that rock monsieur can see the villages of El-Akbara."

Sir Claude pulled up the mule.

"I'll get down here."

He swung himself to the ground before Achmed could speak.

"Take the mule."

"Monsieur is not going alone?"

"Yes. You're to stay here and

wait for me. Give me some of the food."

"But if monsieur wishes to descend I must come with him to show the way."

"I did not say I was going down. Give me the food."

He slung one of the guns over his shoulder.

"But I am responsible for monsieur. When it gets dark—"

"Achmed," Sir Claude said, abruptly, "here's a hundred francs."

He drew out a note and put it into the guide's eager hand.

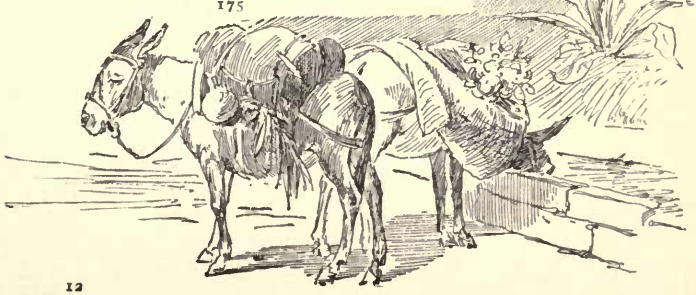
"If you attempt to follow me, you won't get another penny. If you stay here as I tell you, you'll get more. Do you understand?"

"And if—if monsieur does not return?"

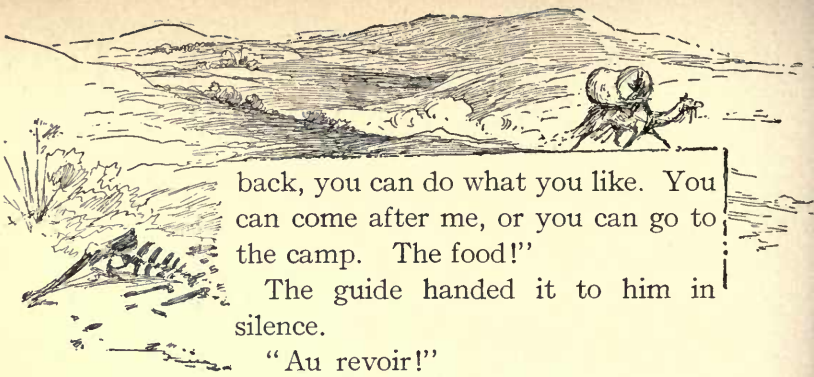
"Have you got a watch?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"If by midnight I haven't come



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back, you can do what you like. You can come after me, or you can go to the camp. The food!"

The guide handed it to him in silence.

"Au revoir!"

"Au revoir, m'sieu! Bon voyage!"

He stood holding the mule, and watched Sir Claude walk away with long strides towards the mountain that was dominated by the mighty rock.

Sir Claude walked on till the rocks hid him from Achmed's sight. Then he stopped for a moment and looked around him. The sun was already declining, and upon those mountains which were not within the circle of its final glories there was settling a strange grayness. Their naked flanks and treeless summits looked worn and weary, like a face lined with the travail of life. The lonely man drew a long breath as he looked at

them. He was wondering, wondering at the thought of the joy that had come to him from these mountain fastnesses only a few hours before. Then he had revelled in their wildness, had been stirred by the thought of their remoteness from England. The blood in his veins had leaped in answer to the winds that blew over them, in answer to the sun that made their scattered crystals shine like jewels. An intense physical well-being had been generated within him by the African airs, the African desolation, by the freedom and the strangeness of this spacious, undressed country.

Now he felt a horror and a hatred of all that had rejoiced him. They had come to him with a horror and a hatred of the men whose native land this was.

Sir Claude that evening was like a man who has fallen into an abyss

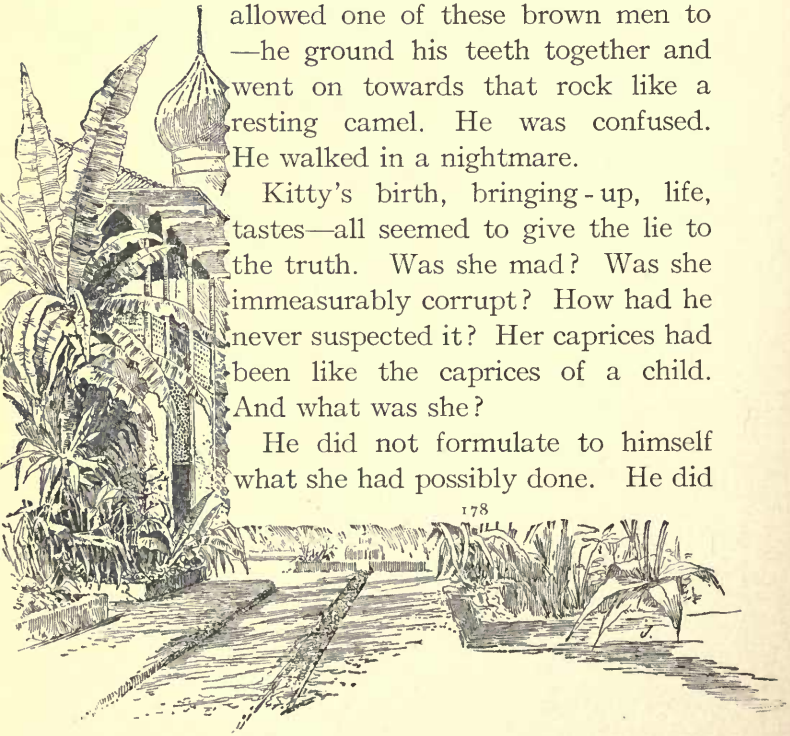


from a sunlit peak. His world, the world he had known and believed in, had suddenly vanished out of his sight. All familiar landmarks were gone. And the utterly incredulous man was turned into a man ready to be credulous of any abomination.

That the woman he had mentally set far above him should have done the unimaginable thing, should have allowed one of these brown men to —he ground his teeth together and went on towards that rock like a resting camel. He was confused. He walked in a nightmare.

Kitty's birth, bringing-up, life, tastes—all seemed to give the lie to the truth. Was she mad? Was she immeasurably corrupt? How had he never suspected it? Her caprices had been like the caprices of a child. And what was she?

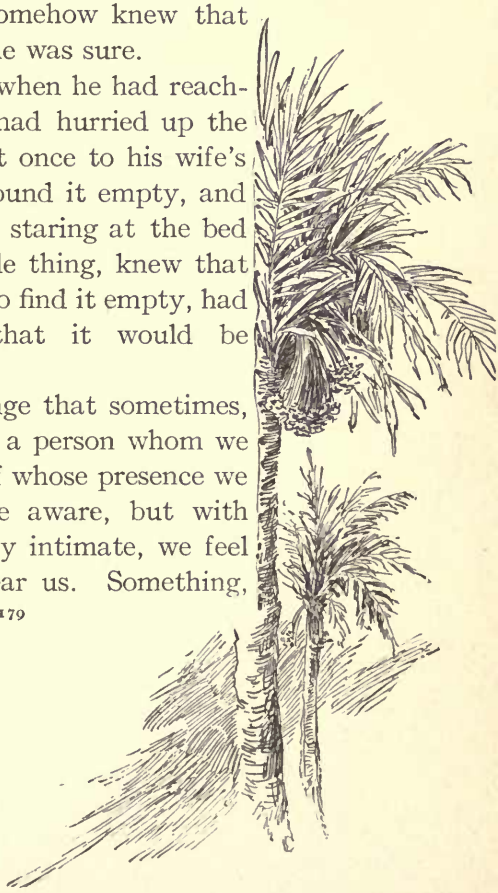
He did not formulate to himself what she had possibly done. He did



not mentally accuse her definitely of what everybody would acknowledge to be the last infamy. He stopped short of that because it seemed to him just then that what he was sure of was enough. For he was sure. Even without Achmed's words—and he believed them, he somehow knew that they were true—he was sure.

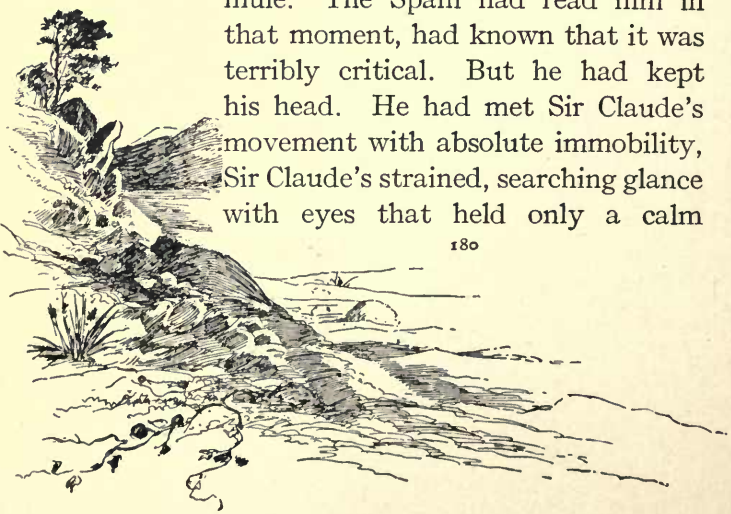
That morning, when he had reached the hotel, he had hurried up the stairs and gone at once to his wife's room. He had found it empty, and as he stood there staring at the bed he knew a horrible thing, knew that he had expected to find it empty, had known almost that it would be empty.

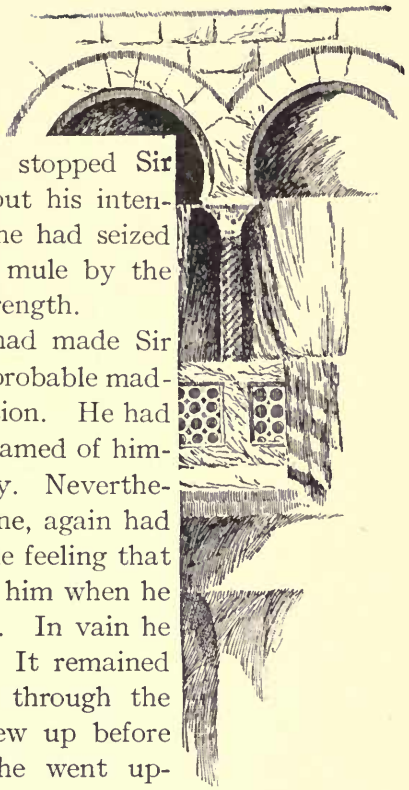
It is very strange that sometimes, if we are close to a person whom we cannot see, and of whose presence we are not otherwise aware, but with whom we are very intimate, we feel that person is near us. Something,



we know not what, tells us so. We may believe that we reject the subtle information, but do we ever really reject it?

Few people would have picked out Sir Claude Wyverne as a sensitive man. Nevertheless, in connection with his wife he could be very sensitive. That morning, as he sat on his mule face to face with the very composed African, who smiled at him half-sleepily, and sent pale-blue smoke out through his dilated nostrils, Sir Claude had felt suddenly as if his wife were near him. It was then that he had looked behind the Spahi, had made a movement as if to get off his mule. The Spahi had read him in that moment, had known that it was terribly critical. But he had kept his head. He had met Sir Claude's movement with absolute immobility, Sir Claude's strained, searching glance with eyes that held only a calm





serenity. And he had stopped Sir Claude from carrying out his intention as certainly as if he had seized and bound him to his mule by the exercise of superior strength.

The African's calm had made Sir Claude realize then the probable madness of his own supposition. He had felt for the moment ashamed of himself and had ridden away. Nevertheless, directly he had gone, again had come to him the horrible feeling that Kitty had been near to him when he was near to Benchaâlal. In vain he combated this feeling. It remained with him all the way through the gorge and until he drew up before the inn door. Then he went upstairs and saw the empty room. And then it seemed to him that he knew —knew the incredible, the impossible.

Yet he did not go back to the Spahi. Kitty had thought that he could not be subtle; anything else,



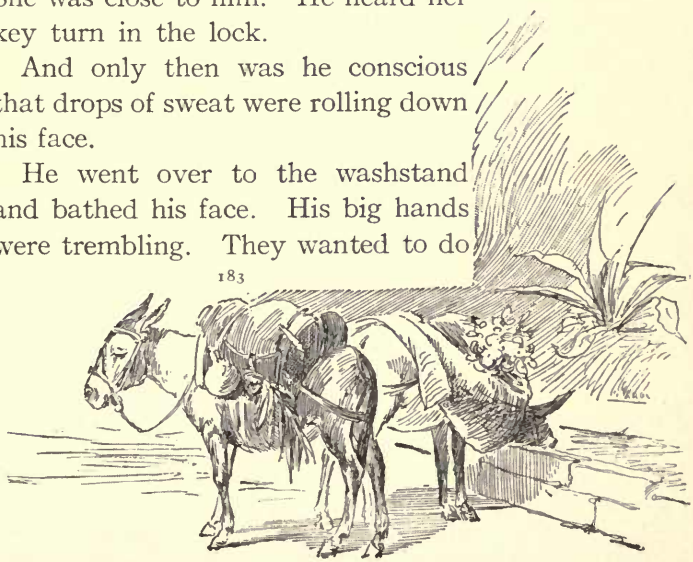
but not subtle. Yet even she did not know, did not divine all that there was in her husband, all that he might be, might do under unusual circumstances.

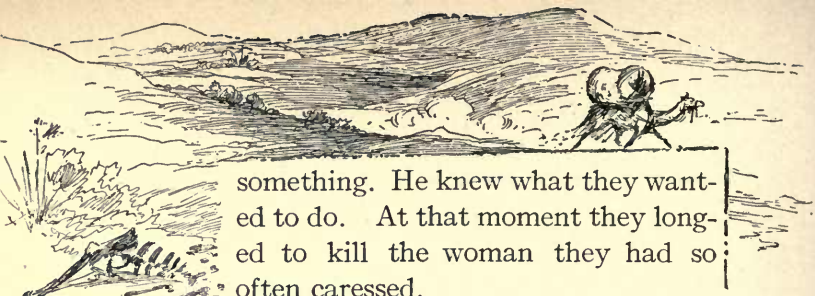
When he saw that empty bedroom a new man seemed suddenly to be born within Sir Claude, a man conceived in infinite travail. That new man was quiet, self-controlled. He stood for a moment very still. Then he turned and went to his bedroom and locked himself in. The green persiennes that were fastened over the French windows which opened on to the veranda prevented any one upon the veranda from looking into the bedroom, but permitted any person in the bedroom to see clearly into the world without. The windows were shut. Sir Claude opened them gently and stood still behind the persiennes. There he remained, waiting, motionless, with his hands hanging by his sides and his eyes,

bloodshot with fatigue, staring at the white road beyond the Judas-trees. And at last he saw coming along the white road a woman with a white face. He saw her look up at his windows, a glance of dreadful, searching anxiety. It seemed to him for a moment that he met her eyes, that they stared into his, that they knew he was there. Then she passed out of his sight, creeping across the pavement of the court. And then, presently, he heard behind him a soft and furtive step, like the step of a thief or a marauder, the creak of a door. She had come in, his wife. She was close to him. He heard her key turn in the lock.

And only then was he conscious that drops of sweat were rolling down his face.

He went over to the washstand and bathed his face. His big hands were trembling. They wanted to do





something. He knew what they wanted to do. At that moment they longed to kill the woman they had so often caressed.

He looked down at them with a sort of dull wonder.

The wonder had never quite left him since then.

Now he walked on again slowly, mounting over the uneven ground towards the great rock from which he would be able to see the three villages of El-Akbara.

When he reached it the sun had gone down, but there was still some red in the western sky. He sat down upon the rock and looked over the desert. He meant to descend presently, but he must rest for a moment. He must think, or try to think.

He felt horribly tired both in body and in mind.

As he looked out upon the desert again the sense of utter loneliness, of

immense desolation came over him. He fingered his gun mechanically as he sat there.

In the distance, among the great, tufted palm-trees, he saw thin trails of smoke rising from the African houses, tiny birds—they were doves, but he did not know it—circling about a brown minaret, that from this height looked black, some camels creeping along the road towards the south. Beside the camels little hooded men walked swiftly.

These hooded men were of the race of the Spahi, of the dark-blooded Oriental race.

A sort of sickness came upon Sir Claude. Kitty was bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, yet now there was a gulf between them. He was on this, the hither side of it. She was upon the farther side, the side where the dark races swarmed beneath the torrid African sun. Secretly, in the night,



while he slept the sleep of the fool, she had crossed the gulf.

He believed he hated her. And he kept on fingering his gun.

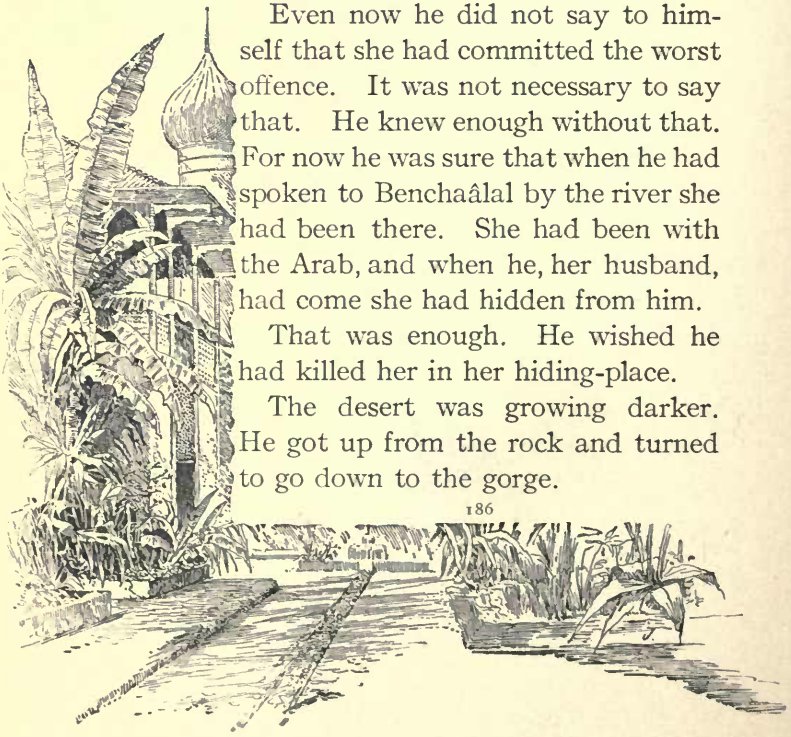
Yes, he hated her, and he had a right to hate her. He said that to himself dully.

There was not a living Englishman who would not condemn her. She had put herself out of court.

Even now he did not say to himself that she had committed the worst offence. It was not necessary to say that. He knew enough without that. For now he was sure that when he had spoken to Benchaâlal by the river she had been there. She had been with the Arab, and when he, her husband, had come she had hidden from him.

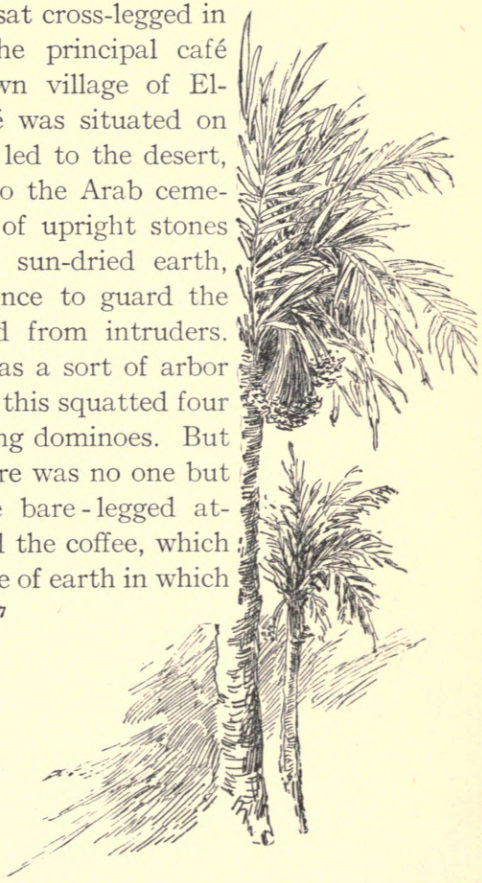
That was enough. He wished he had killed her in her hiding-place.

The desert was growing darker. He got up from the rock and turned to go down to the gorge.



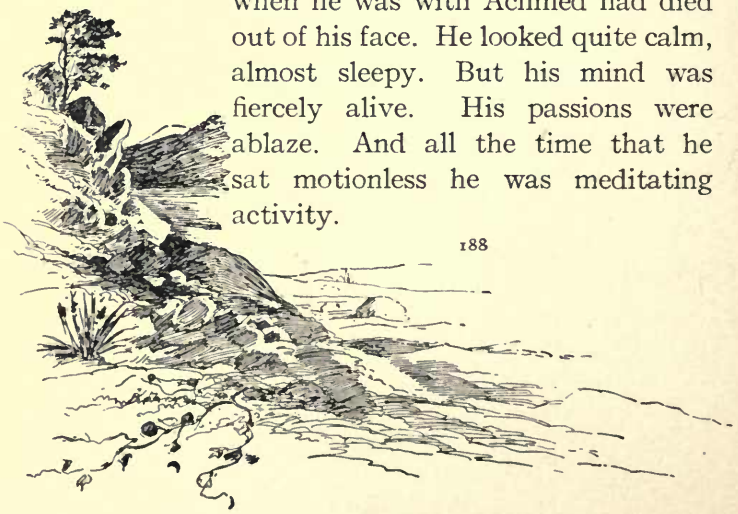
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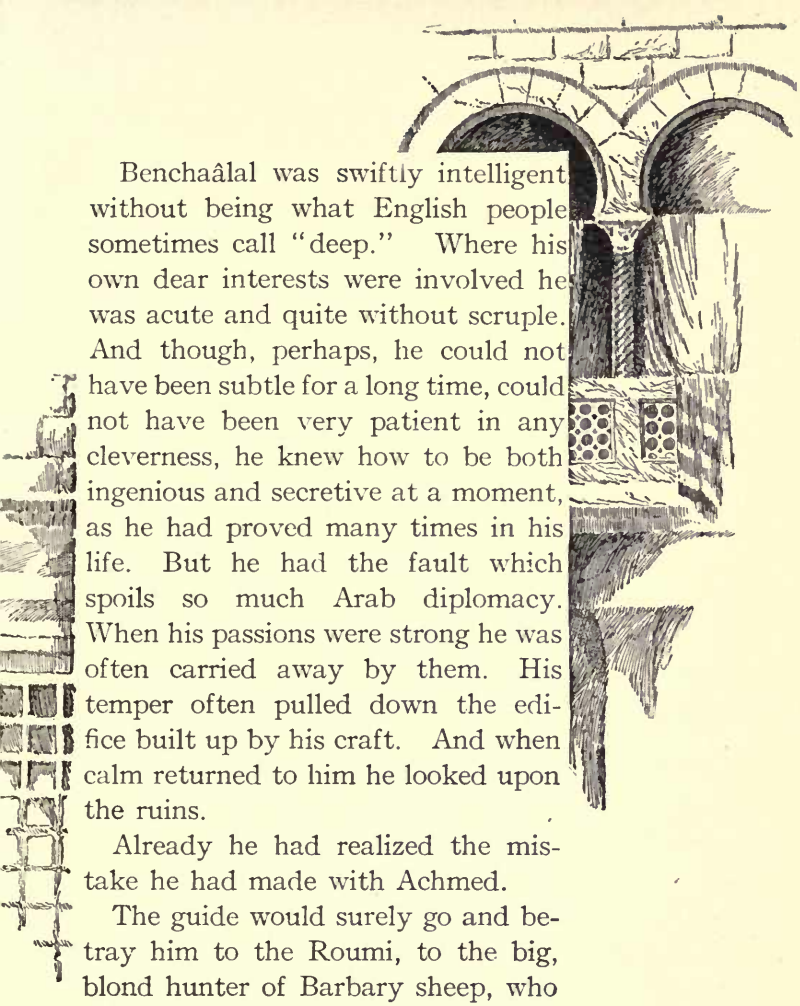
BENCHAÂLAL sat cross-legged in a corner of the principal café maure of the brown village of El-Akbara. This café was situated on the high-road that led to the desert, and was opposite to the Arab cemetery — a quantity of upright stones fixed in the hard, sun-dried earth, without wall or fence to guard the homes of the dead from intruders. Outside the café was a sort of arbor made of reeds. In this squatted four or five Arabs playing dominoes. But within the café there was no one but the Spahi and the bare-legged attendant who served the coffee, which he took from a niche of earth in which



glowed a fire of brushwood. Now and then an Arab passed across the space of the doorway. One or two even looked in and solemnly spoke a greeting to the Spahi. But he seemed to hear nothing, to see no one. With his eyes fixed upon the ground he sipped his coffee and smoked cigarette after cigarette, taking the tobacco from a long silver box which lay beside him, and rolling it swiftly and deftly in the thin slips of paper of which he always carried a large supply.

He was absorbed. His mind lay deep down in reverie. All trace of the fury which had convulsed him when he was with Achmed had died out of his face. He looked quite calm, almost sleepy. But his mind was fiercely alive. His passions were ablaze. And all the time that he sat motionless he was meditating activity.





Benchaâlal was swiftly intelligent without being what English people sometimes call "deep." Where his own dear interests were involved he was acute and quite without scruple. And though, perhaps, he could not have been subtle for a long time, could not have been very patient in any cleverness, he knew how to be both ingenious and secretive at a moment, as he had proved many times in his life. But he had the fault which spoils so much Arab diplomacy. When his passions were strong he was often carried away by them. His temper often pulled down the edifice built up by his craft. And when calm returned to him he looked upon the ruins.

Already he had realized the mistake he had made with Achmed.

The guide would surely go and betray him to the Roumi, to the big, blond hunter of Barbary sheep, who



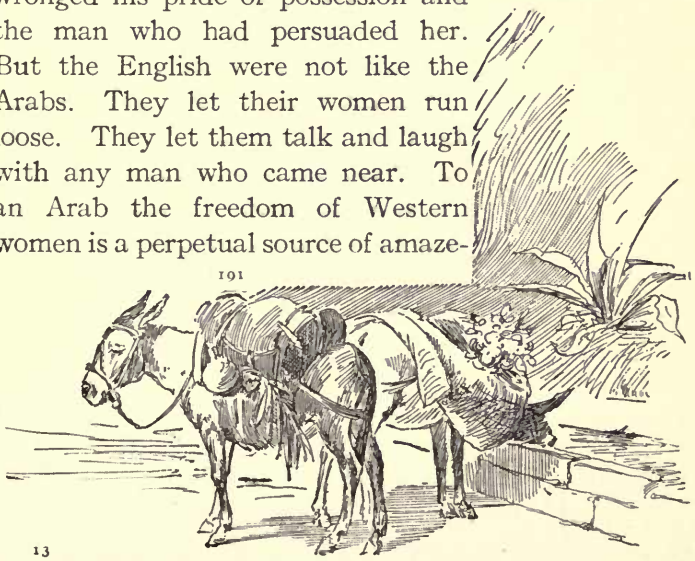
went to bed ere the moon was up, and who left his pretty creature, his little squirrel of the woods, his rose of the garden, his Fatima with the eyes like turquoises, and the tiny hands like silver, to hear the Spahi's serenade, and to sit beside the Spahi by the river. Benchaâlal had a great contempt for the Roumi—the contempt of the cultured Mussulman for the uncultured Christian, than which there are few feelings more unmeasured, few feelings more profound. But he must take the Roumi into account, must reckon with him now that the great mistake was made and that the outburst of fury which had caused it was subsiding.

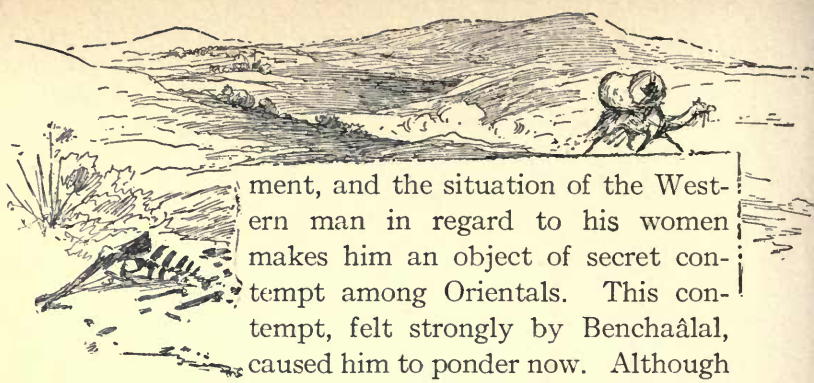
What would the Roumi do?

Benchaâlal had his own ideas about foreigners, gathered chiefly from his intercourse with the French in Algiers and during two visits which he had made to Paris. Of the English

he knew but little. He knew them to be a great nation. He conceived of them as all very rich. He imagined them all dwelling in a northern land which was perpetually shrouded in heavy yellow clouds of great density called by them "Le fogge." The blood in such lands ran cold, he supposed. Without the sun, how could there be fire in men?

He knew very well what an Arab would do, or try to do, if he were told a story such as Achmed would surely tell the Roumi, had, perhaps, already told him. He would kill, or try to kill, the woman who had wronged his pride of possession and the man who had persuaded her. But the English were not like the Arabs. They let their women run loose. They let them talk and laugh with any man who came near. To an Arab the freedom of Western women is a perpetual source of amaze-





ment, and the situation of the Western man in regard to his women makes him an object of secret contempt among Orientals. This contempt, felt strongly by Benchaâlal, caused him to ponder now. Although he knew what he would do were he Sir Claude, he could not tell what Sir Claude would do.

He had looked into the Roumi's face on the river-bank. It had been stern, hard. The eyes were searching. It was a man's face. That was certain. Yet this man had slept each night, leaving his woman to do what she would. And he had deserted her each day. Perhaps he did not care what happened.

Nothing had happened yet.

His mind left Sir Claude and went to Lady Wyverne. And here the Spahi was on surer ground. He had an instinct with women. Western men he did not understand thorough-

ly, despite his intercourse with the French. But he would have laughed to hear any one tell him that he could be long tricked or puzzled by a woman, that a woman could play with him, or read him while keeping the pages of her book closed from his eyes. For a moment he put aside Sir Claude and his possible actions, and concentrated himself upon the little squirrel of the woods, the rose of the garden.

Granted that Sir Claude did not interfere at once, granted that Lady Wyverne was not carried off to Beni-Mora, what would she do? What would she do now if left to herself?

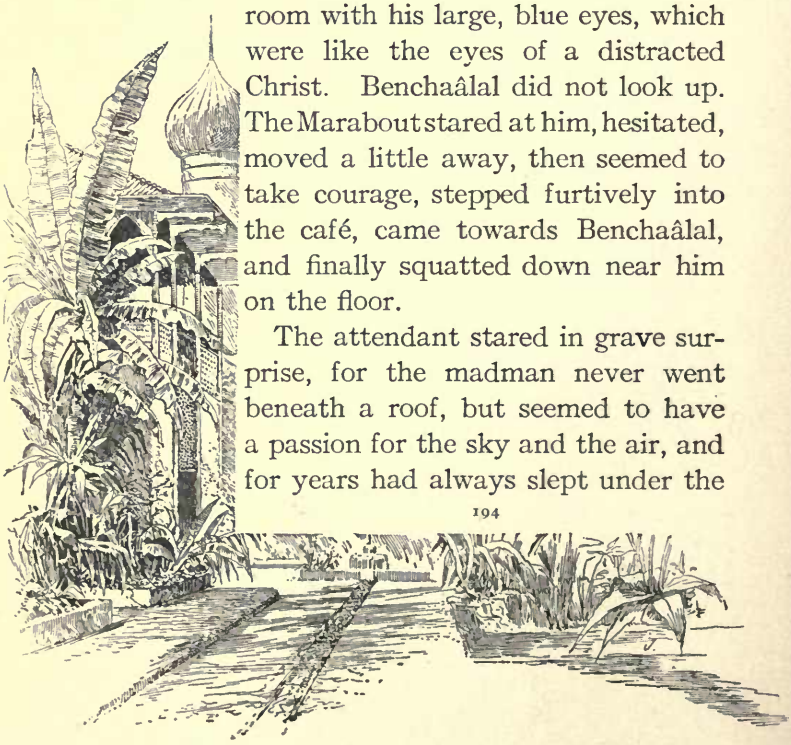
Very deep grew Benchaâlal's reverie. For a while he even forgot to sip his coffee and roll a new cigarette. His eyes were fixed on the floor. His hands dropped down to his feet and held them loosely.

Presently across the sunlit space



of the doorway passed a strange figure clad in bright green, with a green-and-red turban. It was the mad Marabout wandering to and fro, absorbed, led, perhaps, by some hallucination. Two, three times he passed and repassed before the door of the café unobserved by Benchaâlal. Then he came in under the arbor of reeds and stood still, peering into the shadowy room with his large, blue eyes, which were like the eyes of a distracted Christ. Benchaâlal did not look up. The Marabout stared at him, hesitated, moved a little away, then seemed to take courage, stepped furtively into the café, came towards Benchaâlal, and finally squatted down near him on the floor.

The attendant stared in grave surprise, for the madman never went beneath a roof, but seemed to have a passion for the sky and the air, and for years had always slept under the

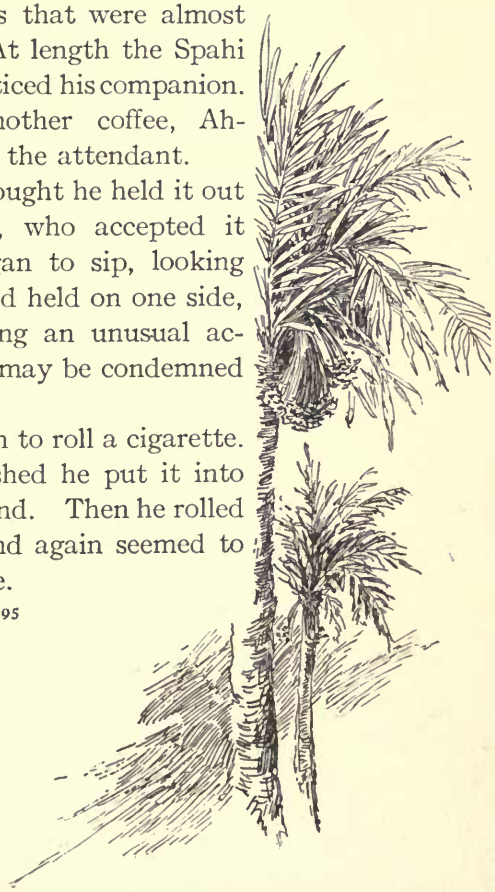


stars. After regarding the Marabout for a moment, he made a guttural sound in his throat and pointed towards the brass coffee-pot. The Marabout paid no attention. He was looking alternately at Benchaâlal and at the floor, with a flickering curiosity and uneasiness that were almost wholly animal. At length the Spahi glanced up and noticed his companion.

"Bring me another coffee, Ahmeda," he said to the attendant.

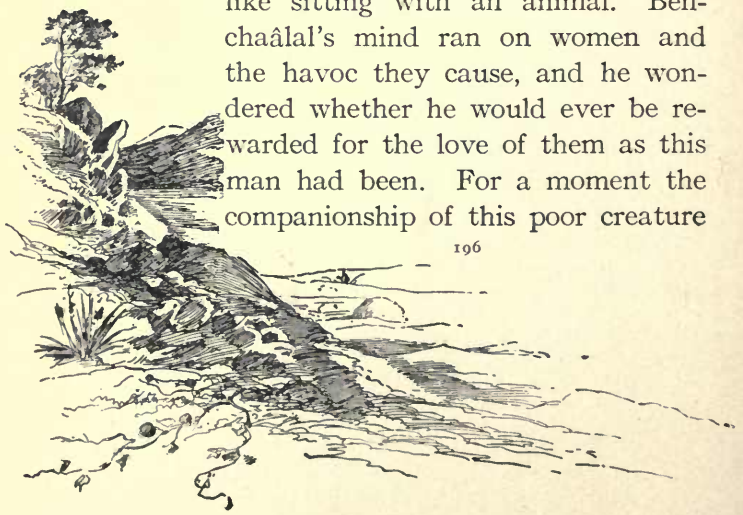
When it was brought he held it out to the Marabout, who accepted it furtively and began to sip, looking away with his head held on one side, like one performing an unusual action that he fears may be condemned if seen.

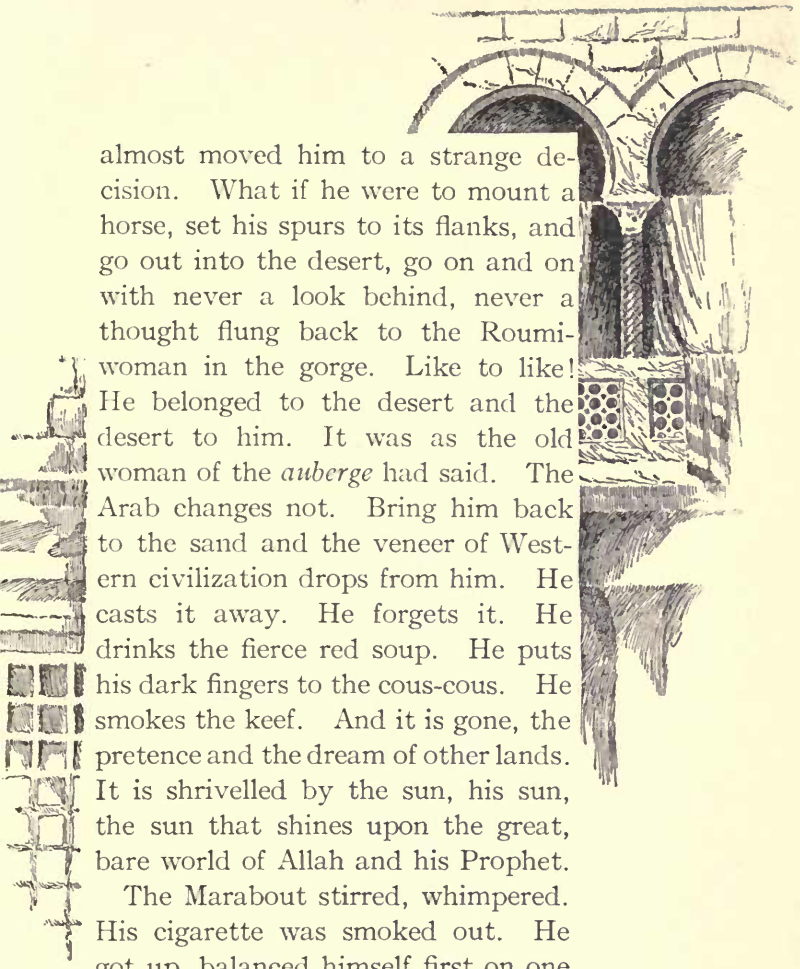
The Spahi began to roll a cigarette. When it was finished he put it into the Marabout's hand. Then he rolled one for himself and again seemed to sink into a reverie.



The Marabout smoked slowly and carefully, gazing at the smoke, as it curled away from his lips and evaporated, with an air of childish wonder. And presently Benchaâlal began to watch him. He remembered when this man had been sane, when he had been respected for his wealth. A visit to Beni-Mora had been his ruin. In the dusty, dancing street, with its wailing music, its gleaming lights, its small, white houses, he had met his fate in the girl from the south, Ayesha.

What a strange thing to go mad for a woman, to come to this! To sit with the Marabout was almost like sitting with an animal. Benchaâlal's mind ran on women and the havoc they cause, and he wondered whether he would ever be rewarded for the love of them as this man had been. For a moment the companionship of this poor creature





almost moved him to a strange decision. What if he were to mount a horse, set his spurs to its flanks, and go out into the desert, go on and on with never a look behind, never a thought flung back to the Roumi-woman in the gorge. Like to like! He belonged to the desert and the desert to him. It was as the old woman of the *auberge* had said. The Arab changes not. Bring him back to the sand and the veneer of Western civilization drops from him. He casts it away. He forgets it. He drinks the fierce red soup. He puts his dark fingers to the cous-cous. He smokes the keef. And it is gone, the pretence and the dream of other lands. It is shrivelled by the sun, his sun, the sun that shines upon the great, bare world of Allah and his Prophet.

The Marabout stirred, whimpered. His cigarette was smoked out. He got up, balanced himself first on one



bare foot, then on the other, cast a shifty, sidelong glance at Benchaâlal, and crept out of the café. The Spahi saw him walk straightforward in the sun until he reached the cemetery beyond the high-road. There he began to wander round and round among the stones that marked the graves, circling almost as a hungry pariah dog sometimes does when it seeks by night for carrion.

Benchaâlal wondered why he had come into the café. What had drawn him? He had surely shown a sort of sympathy, a sort of desire for companionship. Had his possessing thought of a woman gone out to Benchaâlal's thought of a woman? When he met Lady Wyverne in the gorge that night he had come up to her, he had stopped beside her, he had gazed upon her, almost as if he fancied she was his Ayesha.

Pif! The poor wretch was mad!

Useless to think about him! Nevertheless, the Spahi's eyes followed his green robe as he circled—circled among the tombs in the glaring afternoon sun.

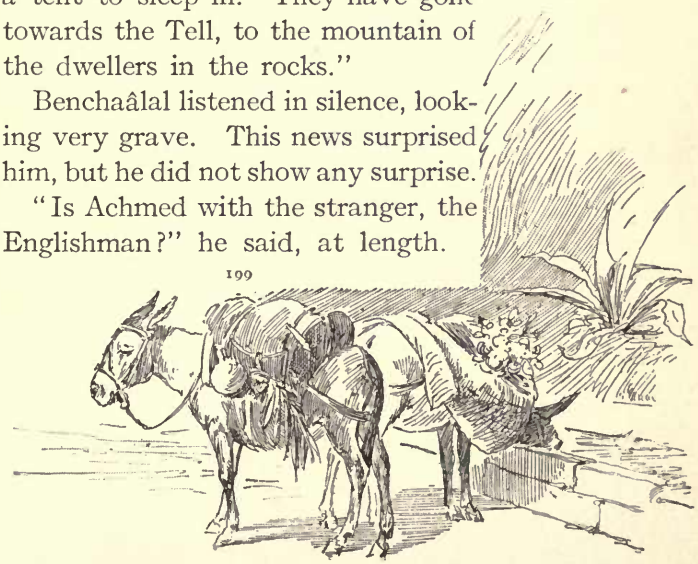
It was nearly sunset when Benchaâlal rose up, paid for his coffee, and went out onto the white road.

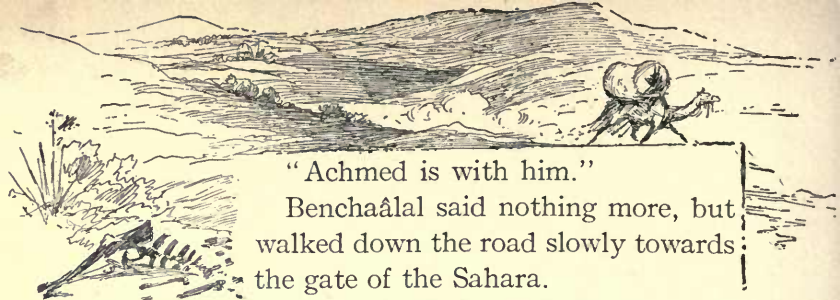
He did not know yet that the Roumi had gone hunting again in the mountains. Achmed had not told him. But now, on the road, he met the sleepy boy from the inn and he learned the news.

"They will be out all night, Benchaâlal Hamdan ben Mohammed," said the boy. "The Roumi has taken a tent to sleep in. They have gone towards the Tell, to the mountain of the dwellers in the rocks."

Benchaâlal listened in silence, looking very grave. This news surprised him, but he did not show any surprise.

"Is Achmed with the stranger, the Englishman?" he said, at length.





"Achmed is with him."

Benchaâlal said nothing more, but walked down the road slowly towards the gate of the Sahara.

So the Englishman had gone away again and had left his woman to do as she willed! Benchaâlal's astonishment deepened as he realized it. He thought about it carefully as he walked, and turned it over many times in his mind. Crafty as he was, he dismissed the idea that this departure was a trap. He could not help having an Arab's point of view, and it would have been absolutely impossible for an Arab who knew the truth to ride off into the mountains leaving his woman alone, even if he meant to come back and surprise her. He must have stayed. He must have acted quickly. His jealousy must have fulfilled its lust promptly, decisively, furiously.

Benchaâlal decided in his mind that

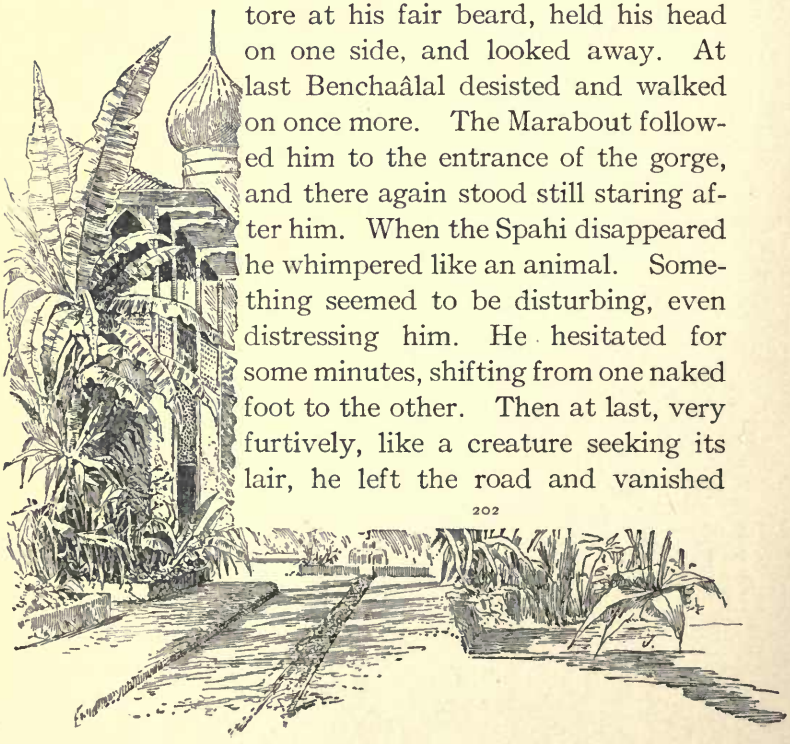
the Roumi did not know anything yet. Despite his return in the night he did not know. But surely Achmed would tell him!

The Spahi was now entering the gorge, and was close to the rock where Sir Claude had seen him when they spoke together. Near it, with his flute to his lips, sat the perpetual piper playing the perpetual tune. Benchaâlal glanced at him, then backward towards the desert. Not far off he saw the Marabout coming furtively along the road, following him. He stopped. The Marabout stopped, too, and looked uneasy, but did not retreat. Benchaâlal began really to wonder why the poor creature was intent upon him. Some strange idea must have dawned in his mind. Usually he loved solitude. He attached himself to no one. Many had striven to persuade him to enter their houses, had endeavored to win some rec-



ognition, some affection from him, but always in vain. He accepted the food they put into his hand, but that was all. Directly he had it he fled, to eat it alone in some hidden corner of the rocks or some recess of the palm gardens. Had he conceived a crazy liking for the Spahi?

Benchaâlal waved his hand, called out to him. But the Marabout only tore at his fair beard, held his head on one side, and looked away. At last Benchaâlal desisted and walked on once more. The Marabout followed him to the entrance of the gorge, and there again stood still staring after him. When the Spahi disappeared he whimpered like an animal. Something seemed to be disturbing, even distressing him. He hesitated for some minutes, shifting from one naked foot to the other. Then at last, very furtively, like a creature seeking its lair, he left the road and vanished



among the rocks beneath the mountain from which, just then, Sir Claude was looking down upon the desert and the villages among the palms.

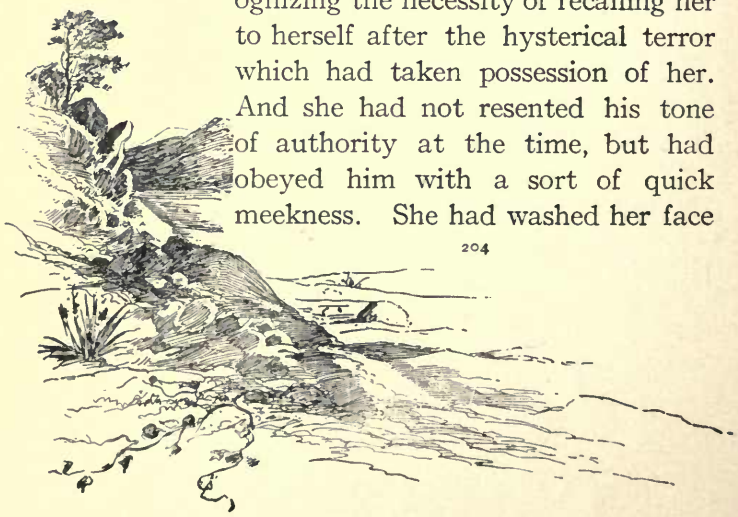


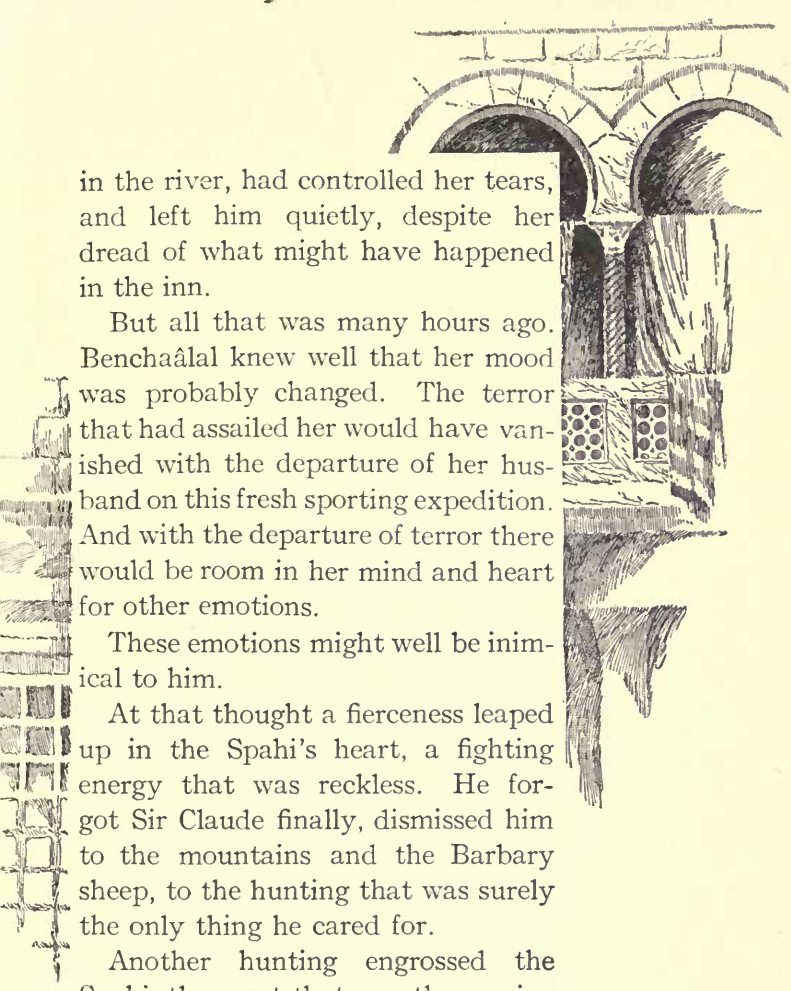
XIII

BENCHAÂLAL had already forgotten him.

As the Spahi approached the inn his mind had gone to the woman within it, and the fires smouldering within him began to blaze up once more.

Lady Wyverne and he had parted strangely by the river. He had been almost brutally imperious to her, recognizing the necessity of recalling her to herself after the hysterical terror which had taken possession of her. And she had not resented his tone of authority at the time, but had obeyed him with a sort of quick meekness. She had washed her face





in the river, had controlled her tears, and left him quietly, despite her dread of what might have happened in the inn.

But all that was many hours ago. Benchaâlal knew well that her mood was probably changed. The terror that had assailed her would have vanished with the departure of her husband on this fresh sporting expedition. And with the departure of terror there would be room in her mind and heart for other emotions.

These emotions might well be inimical to him.

At that thought a fierceness leaped up in the Spahi's heart, a fighting energy that was reckless. He forgot Sir Claude finally, dismissed him to the mountains and the Barbary sheep, to the hunting that was surely the only thing he cared for.

Another hunting engrossed the Spahi, the sport that was the passion



of his life, the consuming passion, as it is of the lives of so many Arabs, taking precedence of all things, even of the pursuit of money. There was a woman to be conquered. She had nearly been conquered. So he told himself. Was she to escape now because of one *contretemps* brought about by the lack of ingenuity of the fool Achmed? His hot blood boiled at the thought.

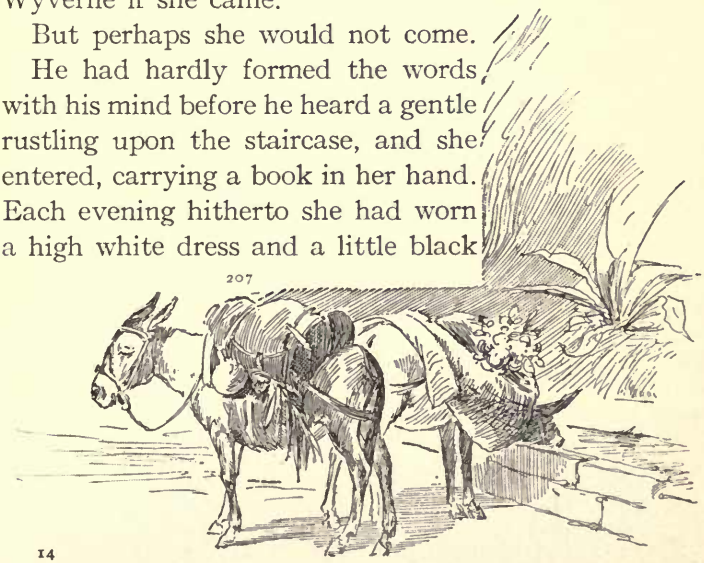
As he came to the Judas-trees he did not see Lady Wyverne upon the veranda. The persiennes and the window of her room were open. He fancied he discerned a shadowy figure beyond them, and believed her to be there, perhaps watching for his return. He wondered whether she wished to meet or to avoid him. With difficulty he summoned patience to him. He knew it was quite useless to try to speak with her for some hours, and he went to his room and

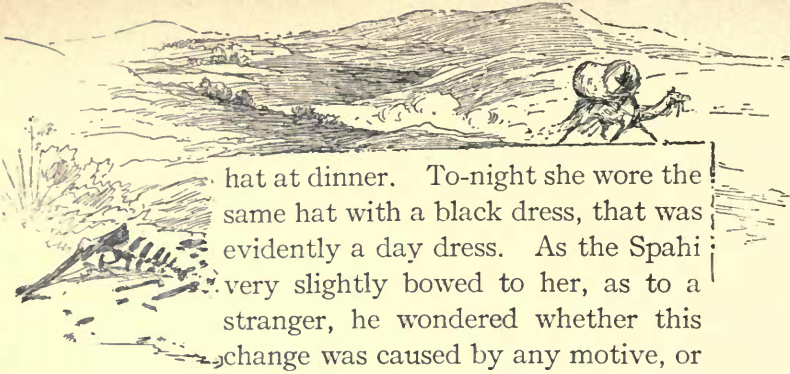
shut himself in till the bell rang for dinner. Then he came down majestically, in his wide linen trousers, his red jacket, his red gaiters, newly perfumed, his long eyes shining beneath his turban.

When he entered the dining-room it was occupied only by a young French couple, a painter and his wife, who had arrived that afternoon, and who stared at him with an interest which he did not return; although he bowed to them in the French manner as he came in, and sat down at his little table, placing himself so that he would be sitting sideways to Lady Wyverne if she came.

But perhaps she would not come.

He had hardly formed the words with his mind before he heard a gentle rustling upon the staircase, and she entered, carrying a book in her hand. Each evening hitherto she had worn a high white dress and a little black





hat at dinner. To-night she wore the same hat with a black dress, that was evidently a day dress. As the Spahi very slightly bowed to her, as to a stranger, he wondered whether this change was caused by any motive, or emotion, discoverable by him. Now and then he glanced at her while she ate, trying to read her face. He thought it looked colder, harder than usual, even a little older. But that might be a fancy caused by his knowledge of what had happened to her that day. She did not stay till the end of dinner. After the first course of meat she got up quietly and went out. He heard her dress rustling as she ascended the stairs.

He lingered a long while at his table, taking his coffee there instead of outside under the veranda. The French painter and his wife disappeared, and he was left alone. He wondered what Lady Wyverne was

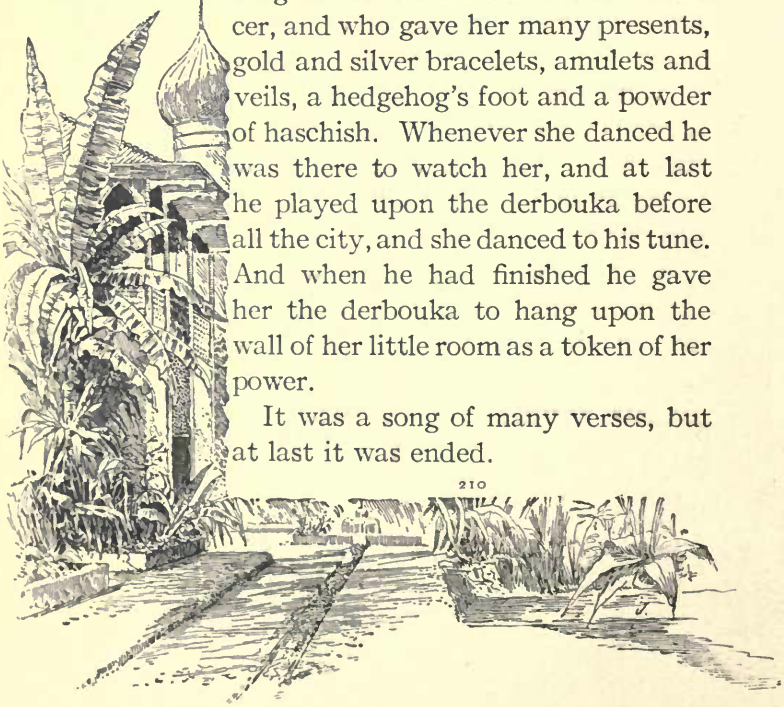
doing, whether she had shut herself up in her room, had gone to bed, whether she would be out on the veranda. Surely she would give him a chance of speaking with her. If not, he meant to make one for himself. He waited till the household and the servants were safely at supper. Then he strolled out to the little court, and went to the place where he had stood on the evening of the Wyvernes' arrival, by the fence under the Judas-trees. He did not look up immediately, but took out the silver box and carefully rolled a cigarette. When he had put it between his lips and lit it, he glanced at the veranda.

She was not there, but he saw the gleam of light in her room, the window of which was open. And presently he saw her figure, like a black shadow, passing to and fro in the lit space. What was she doing? Pack-



ing, perhaps, or getting ready to come out. He waited quietly. Presently he saw her figure no more. But the light still burned. He had finished his cigarette. He threw the end of it away. Then he opened his mouth and began to sing, or whine, the curious Eastern song with which he had serenaded Lady Wyverne before he had ever spoken to her. It was a song about a Caïd who loved a dancer, and who gave her many presents, gold and silver bracelets, amulets and veils, a hedgehog's foot and a powder of haschish. Whenever she danced he was there to watch her, and at last he played upon the derbouka before all the city, and she danced to his tune. And when he had finished he gave her the derbouka to hang upon the wall of her little room as a token of her power.

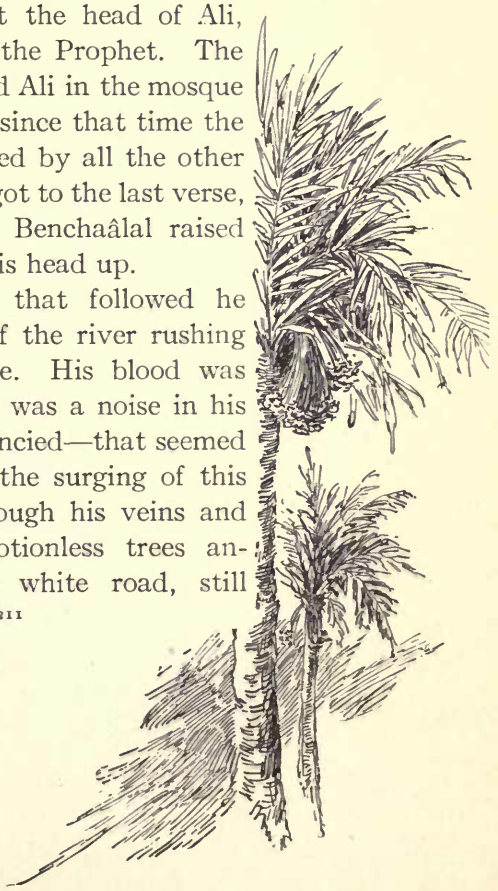
It was a song of many verses, but at last it was ended.



The Spahi looked at the light, smoked another cigarette. Still she did not come.

Then he sang the *chanson des vacances* of the children of the Zibans; and then he sang the song of the Great Mozabite whose love demanded as a marriage-gift the head of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. The Mozabite murdered Ali in the mosque with a sabre, and since that time the Mozabites are hated by all the other Arabs. When he got to the last verse, the hatred verse, Benchaâlal raised his voice, lifting his head up.

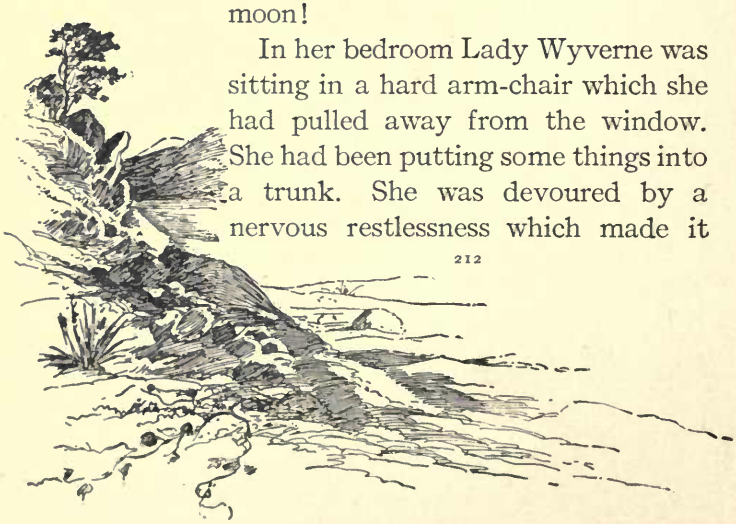
In the silence that followed he heard the noise of the river rushing through the gorge. His blood was on fire, and there was a noise in his brain—or so he fancied—that seemed to be caused by the surging of this blood on fire through his veins and arteries. The motionless trees angered him. The white road, still



and empty, angered him. The black rocks that frowned above the inn infuriated him as he stared up at them. Everything seemed still to watch his impotence, to observe the failure of his desires.

But as yet he could do nothing. He must wait until the landlord and his wife had gone to bed. Another hour and, if she had not come to him, he would go to her. He moved away from the fence and went out onto the white road. There he strolled softly up and down, up and down. Above him the deep-purple sky began to grow bright with silver.

Surely she would come with the moon!



In her bedroom Lady Wyverne was sitting in a hard arm-chair which she had pulled away from the window. She had been putting some things into a trunk. She was devoured by a nervous restlessness which made it

almost impossible for her to keep still, and the act of packing seemed to back up a resolution which she thought she had come to, the resolution to see Benchaâlal no more. She said to herself that her husband might leave her alone, or stay with her, might sleep or wake, be careless or watchful. It did not concern her any longer. She had done with her whim. For she had told herself it was a whim. The terror she had felt when she crouched down, hiding in the Spahi's cloak, had struck from her mind the caprice which had always dominated her. For she had only had a caprice for Benchaâlal. That she said to herself again and again. She would never risk her dignity more. It was over, this "bit of fun" in the desert, and thank God it had led to no evil consequences. For Crumpet could not know anything. His unexpected return must



have been really due to the discomfort of the inn at the salt mountain. It must have been her own feeling of guilt which had made her imagine a strangeness in his manner, a certain coldness and reserve unusual in him. At the worst his suspicions must have been quite vague. It occurred to her that Achmed might have spoken, or, if he had not, might yet speak, tell what he knew. But why should he? She divined that he was in Benchaâlal's pay, though the Spahi had not told her so. She knew Achmed had been to the villages that day. No doubt he had seen Benchaâlal. No doubt Benchaâlal had made things "all right." She put away her fears, told herself that she had had a lucky escape, and resolved henceforward to have nothing to do with any strangeness that caught at her curiosity in Africa.

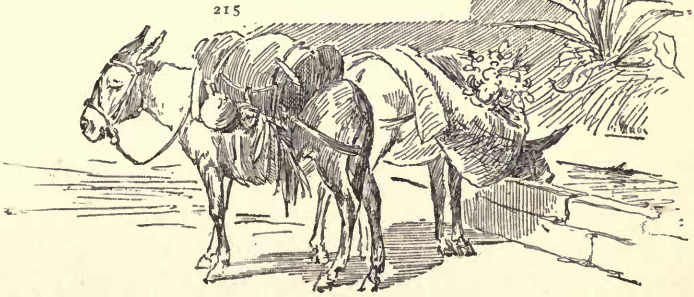
She sat down in the hard arm-chair

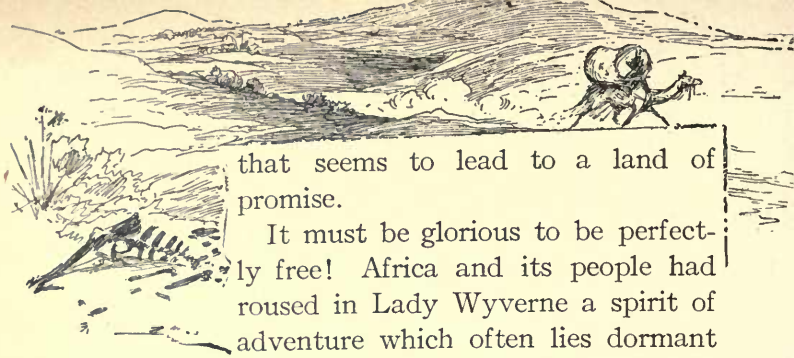
and took up a book. It was a French novel. As she looked at its first pages she seemed to hear the tap of high-heeled boots upon the *trottoirs* of Paris. Well, she adored Paris! It would be delicious to see it again, delicious to go to the shops, and—

Benchaâlal began to sing the whining song of the Caïd who loved the dancer and who played for her upon the derbouka.

Lady Wyverne's novel dropped down into her lap. She sat quite still, listening.

It was ugly; yes, it was quite ugly. That whining voice would have no success if it sang in her world. That tune would be considered "too shockingly hideous." And yet it won upon her, it fascinated her, it made her regret that she was not free, free as a man is to follow his caprice, to investigate any mystery that appeals to him, to set his feet in any path





that seems to lead to a land of promise.

It must be glorious to be perfectly free! Africa and its people had roused in Lady Wyverne a spirit of adventure which often lies dormant in those who are highly capricious, and this spirit of adventure extended its arms to the Spahi, as to a magician who could give it what it longed for.

Benchaâlal's voice died away, ending in the air, like a thing thrown up towards the stars.

Lady Wyverne took up her book again. But all the fascination of Paris had evaporated from its pages, which now seemed arid and hard as the pavements which echoed with high heels. She thought of naked brown feet treading softly in African slippers.

Again Benchaâlal sang.

She knew quite well why he was singing. It was his summons to her

to come out to him. And she was not going to obey. She was soon going to shut the persiennes, undress, put out the light, get into bed. She looked at the bed. It was intended to be slept in. And she would not sleep. How utterly impossible it would be to sleep!

The *chanson des vacances* did not sound very gay to her ears. She did not know what it meant, but fancied it a song of the sadness of the desert. As she listened to it she thought of the morrow. Certainly they would go away on the morrow. Once more she would be isolated with Crumpet. Her intercourse with the Spahi had opened her eyes thoroughly to the nullity of Crumpet—except when he was angry. She felt certain that if he were really roused to anger, her husband could be impressive, even terrible. But otherwise—! There was something tragic in possessing a

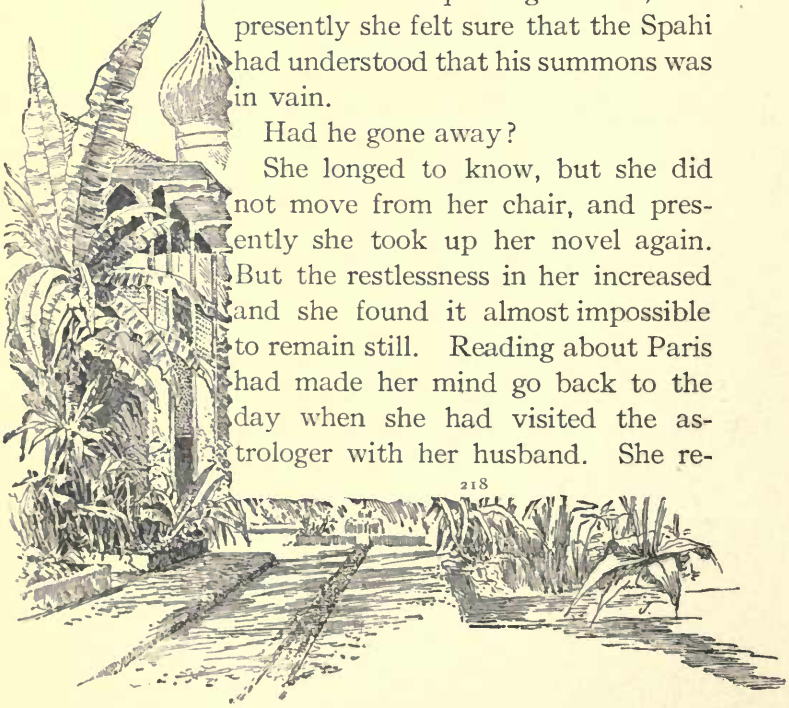


husband who could only be interesting when he was furious.

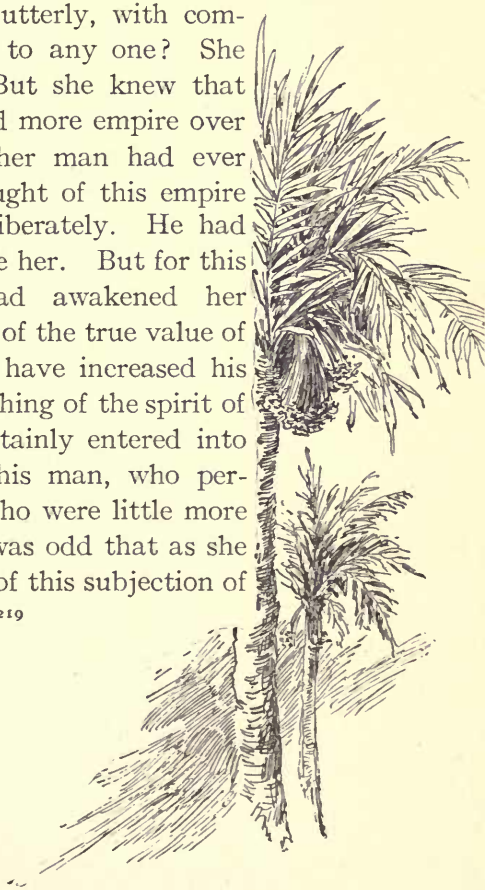
Benchaâlal was always interesting, and she had never seen him furious. Now he sang the song of the Mozabite who murdered the Prophet's son-in-law in the mosque. The hatred verse sounded quite loudly in her ears. Then there was silence. She listened. She expected another song. But the silence prolonged itself, and presently she felt sure that the Spahi had understood that his summons was in vain.

Had he gone away?

She longed to know, but she did not move from her chair, and presently she took up her novel again. But the restlessness in her increased and she found it almost impossible to remain still. Reading about Paris had made her mind go back to the day when she had visited the astrologer with her husband. She re-



called his written words. He had foreseen that her husband would be in danger of losing her—for so she interpreted the "*grande perte.*" He would be in danger of losing her, but had he ever really possessed her? Had any one? And she, could she ever give herself utterly, with complete abnegation, to any one? She did not know. But she knew that the Spahi had had more empire over her than any other man had ever gained. She thought of this empire as at an end deliberately. He had begun to dominate her. But for this fright, which had awakened her sharply to a sense of the true value of events, he might have increased his dominion. Something of the spirit of the slave had certainly entered into her while with this man, who perhaps had wives who were little more than slaves. It was odd that as she now sat thinking of this subjection of



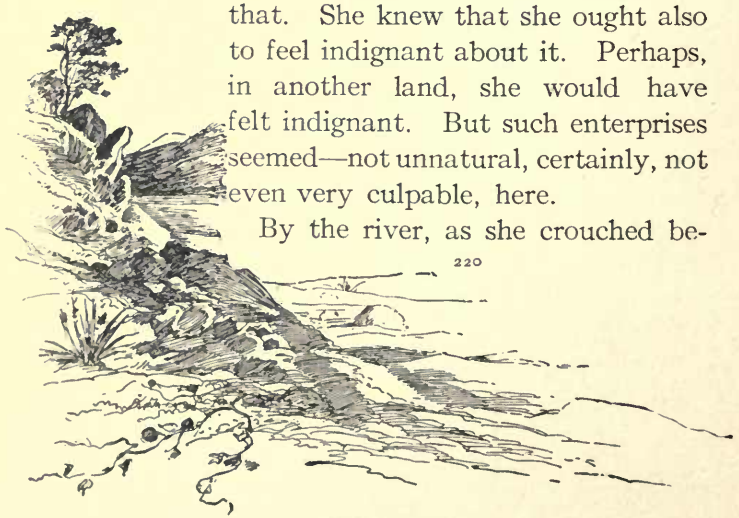
her will and spirit to his she did not feel angry or even greatly humbled. Rather she was conscious of missing a pleasure which she desired to enjoy once more.

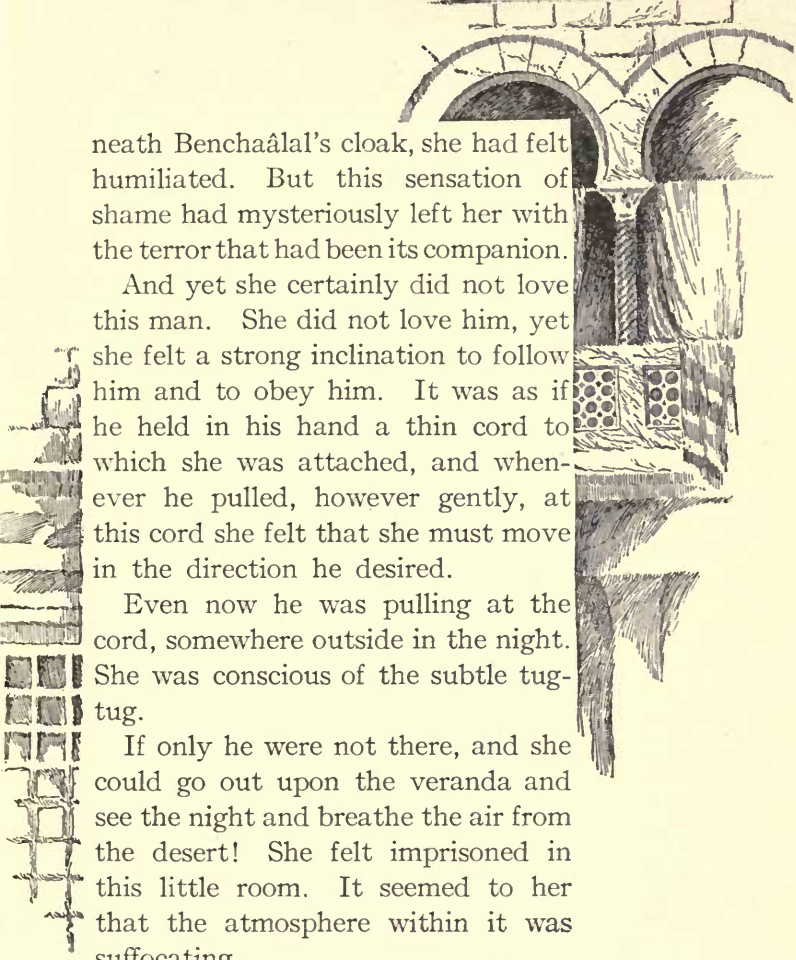
She sighed and again looked at the high bed. It was certainly impossible that she could sleep. She wondered where her husband was; probably stretched on a camp-bed under the shadow of his tent, snoring. Mountains surrounded him, she supposed. And at dawn he would be out with his gun.

And if Achmed had told him!

But Achmed's lips were closed by the Spahi's money. She felt sure of that. She knew that she ought also to feel indignant about it. Perhaps, in another land, she would have felt indignant. But such enterprises seemed—not unnatural, certainly, not even very culpable, here.

By the river, as she crouched be-





neath Benchaâlal's cloak, she had felt humiliated. But this sensation of shame had mysteriously left her with the terror that had been its companion.

And yet she certainly did not love this man. She did not love him, yet she felt a strong inclination to follow him and to obey him. It was as if he held in his hand a thin cord to which she was attached, and whenever he pulled, however gently, at this cord she felt that she must move in the direction he desired.

Even now he was pulling at the cord, somewhere outside in the night. She was conscious of the subtle tug-tug.

If only he were not there, and she could go out upon the veranda and see the night and breathe the air from the desert! She felt imprisoned in this little room. It seemed to her that the atmosphere within it was suffocating.



She had packed her things in readiness for the morrow's departure, and was wearing a travelling dress, as the Spahi had noticed. It was insufferably tight and thick, and now, unable to be still, she got up, went to her trunk, and took out a dress of a thinner material and dark red in color. She had not worn it in El-Akbara. Quickly she exchanged the travelling dress for it. Then she looked in the glass. She was surprised by the excited expression on her face. Her shining eyes were full of anticipation. This red gown looked unfinished without any jewels. She had a small jewel-case in her dressing-bag. She opened it, took out a long diamond chain, and hung it round her neck.

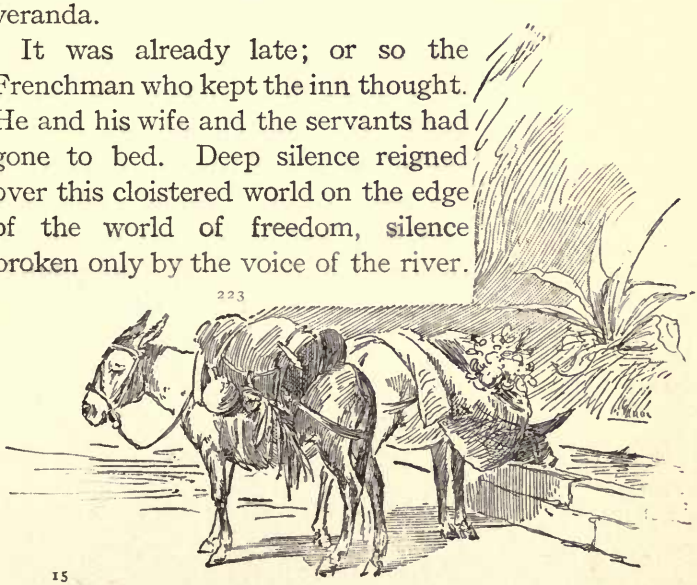
She had heard that the Arabs delight in jewels and in all sparkling things, that their women are covered with gold coins and precious amulets.

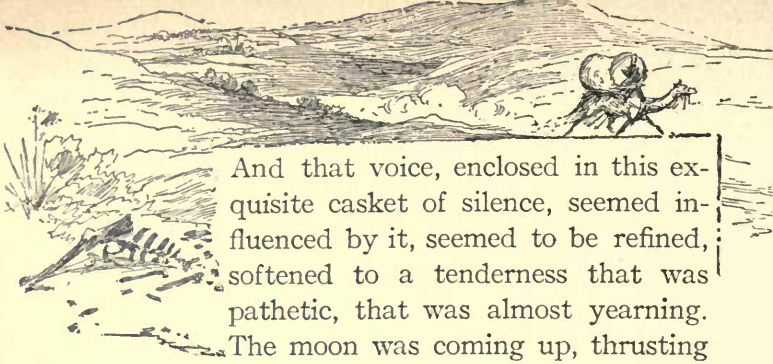
A great wish came to her that the Spahi might see her once, for a moment, in this red gown and with these diamonds. It was the desire of a coquette. After to-morrow they would probably never meet again. No doubt he would quickly forget all about her. She felt as if she would like to leave a last impression that would efface his remembrance of her, sobbing, tear-stained, and—obedient.

She sighed, standing still and holding the diamond chain lightly with her two hands.

Then she did what she had resolved not to do. She stepped out onto the veranda.

It was already late; or so the Frenchman who kept the inn thought. He and his wife and the servants had gone to bed. Deep silence reigned over this cloistered world on the edge of the world of freedom, silence broken only by the voice of the river.





And that voice, enclosed in this exquisite casket of silence, seemed influenced by it, seemed to be refined, softened to a tenderness that was pathetic, that was almost yearning. The moon was coming up, thrusting its golden rim above the ebony silhouette of a great rock.

Lady Wyverne watched it almost breathlessly, as it rose with a mysterious steadiness, till its full circle was released from the fierce and dramatic shadow and was at liberty in the serene and starry sky.

That prisoner at least was free.

She looked across the court at the dark trees and at the road beyond. No one was upon it. She looked away to the dim shapes of the mountains. Her husband was somewhere among them. With the coming of the deep night a slight uneasiness that had been lurking in the under part of her mind had disappeared.

Sir Claude was certainly away irrevocably.

And Benchaâlal?

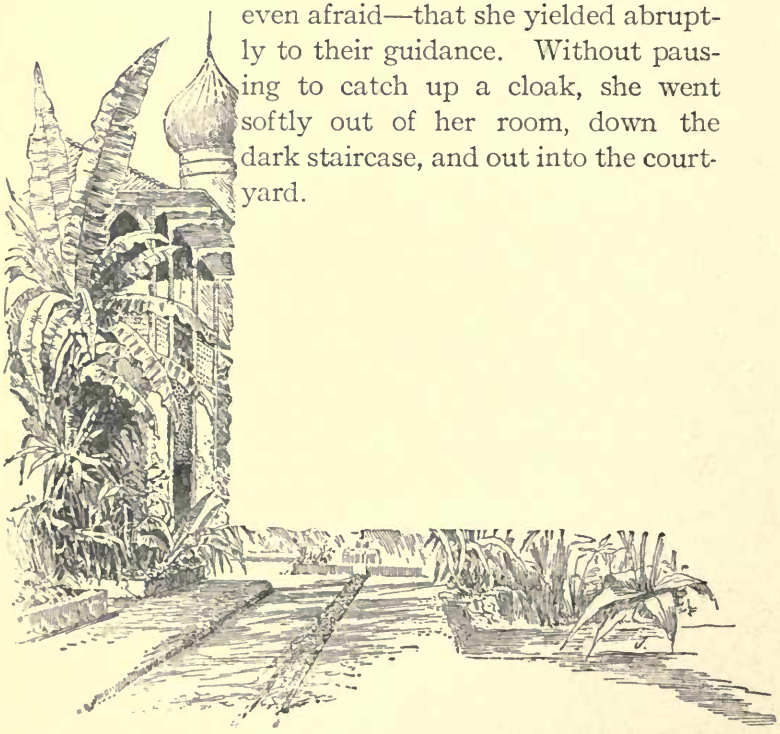
A shadowy figure stole down the road, going towards the desert. It passed before she had had time to look at it closely, and disappeared into the moonlight. That it was an Arab she had seen. But that was all. The figure had seemed to be running. It fled as quickly, as silently as a shadow over a white sheet.

Lady Wyverne was startled and held her breath for a moment. She even turned half round to the lighted room behind her, moved by a sudden feeling that there was danger in this solitude, that she had better go in from the veranda, close the persiennes, and forget the strange magic without. But as she turned she again heard the Spahi singing, only just heard him. The voice was almost a murmur, and she could not tell



where it came from. But she knew that he was waiting, that he had seen her, that he was calling her.

Once again, as so many times in her life, the hands, the light but wilfully obstinate hands of caprice took hold of her. And she was so afraid of resisting them—knowing that to-night there was alive within her a something that was cautious, that was even afraid—that she yielded abruptly to their guidance. Without pausing to catch up a cloak, she went softly out of her room, down the dark staircase, and out into the courtyard.



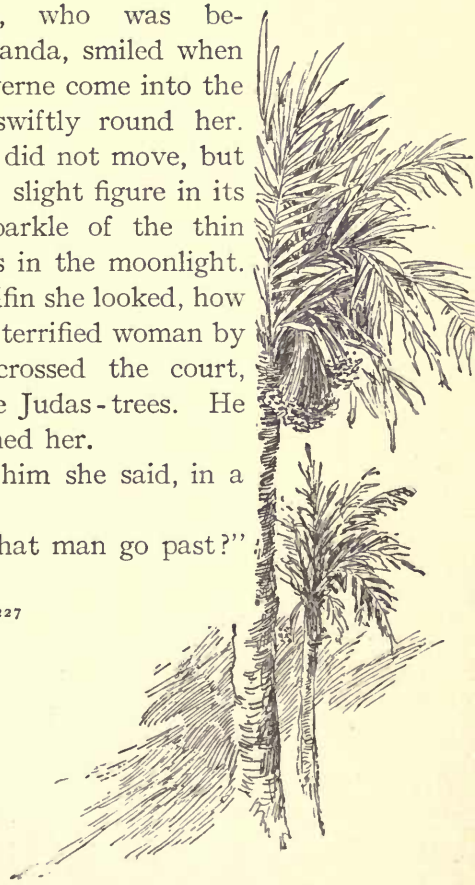
XIV

BENCHAÂLAL, who was beneath the veranda, smiled when he saw Lady Wyverne come into the court and look swiftly round her. For a moment he did not move, but watched the little, slight figure in its red dress, the sparkle of the thin chain of diamonds in the moonlight. How dainty and elfin she looked, how different from the terrified woman by the river! She crossed the court, going towards the Judas-trees. He came out and joined her.

When she saw him she said, in a low voice:

"Did you see that man go past?"

"Madame?"



"Just now, a man—running! He went that way."

She pointed towards the mouth of the gorge.

"I saw no one, madame. But I was not thinking of men on the road. Was it an Arab?"

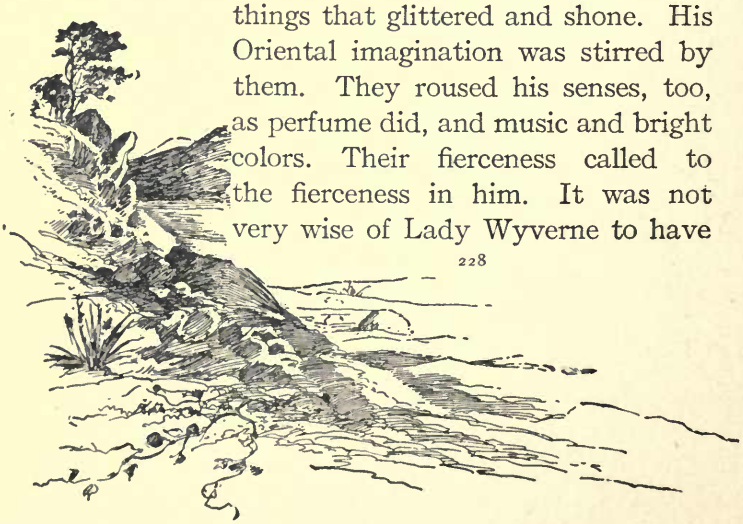
"Yes."

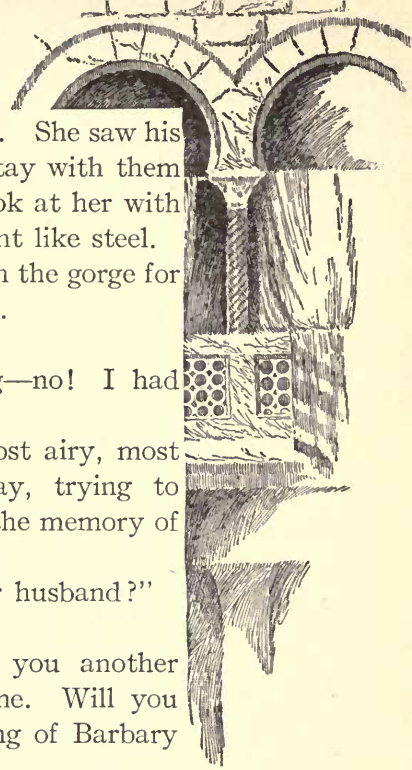
"Let us follow him."

"No. I have come down to say good-bye. We go to-morrow. I have been very silly here and I am very glad to go."

She stood looking at him. Again her hands had gone up to the chain of diamonds and held it lightly.

Benchaâlal loved jewels, and all things that glittered and shone. His Oriental imagination was stirred by them. They roused his senses, too, as perfume did, and music and bright colors. Their fierceness called to the fierceness in him. It was not very wise of Lady Wyverne to have





put them on that night. She saw his eyes go to them and stay with them for an instant, then look at her with a glance that was bright like steel.

"Let us walk through the gorge for the last time," he said.

She shook her head.

"After this morning—no! I had a fright, a lesson!"

She spoke in her most airy, most petulantly childish way, trying to abolish from his mind the memory of her hysterical collapse.

"A lesson from your husband?"

"Well—yes."

"And he is giving you another lesson to-night, madame. Will you never learn the meaning of Barbary sheep?"

As he finished he glanced nervously at the hotel, as if he suspected that they were being watched, overheard. In reply to his glance she said:

"Well, just beyond the trees, then!"



He held open the gate for her. They passed out and went a few steps down the road.

"You don't understand Englishmen," she said.

"Mon Dieu! How can I?" He shrugged his shoulders and lifted his slim hands. "We get our blood warmed each day by the sun, madame, we Arabs. How can we understand?"

His eyes were again on her jewels. They spoke to him in the moonbeams. Each diamond, when it glittered, had a voice.

"You think—?"

She hesitated. She knew what he was thinking, that her husband cared nothing for her, that his soul was wrapped up in the love of sport. It seemed as if it were so. But she knew that it was not. She knew, and yet so subtle was this man's influence upon her that now he sent to

her his doubt—if it were doubt and not pretence of doubt.

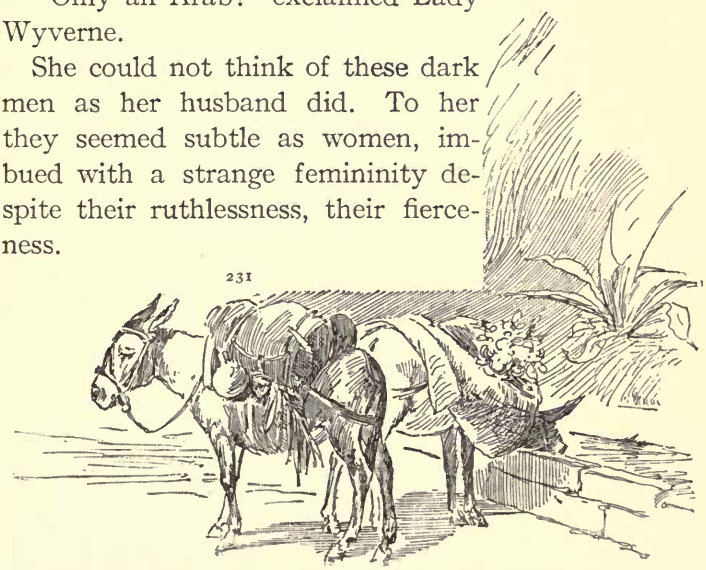
He moved on a few steps very quietly, and she went with him as if unconsciously.

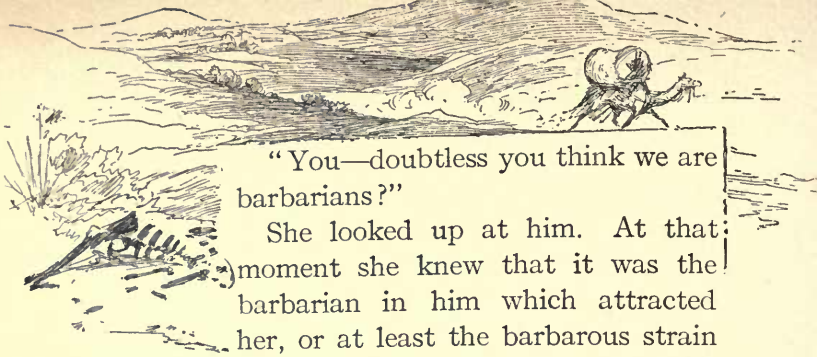
"Madame, I think that what woman chooses not to see she does not see, that what woman chooses not to realize she does not realize. Am I wrong? I am only an Arab. I cannot know. I can only hazard. I can only guess."

Humility from a man with eyes like his, eyes sparkling with intelligence, keen and searching, almost cunning, came absurdly.

"Only an Arab!" exclaimed Lady Wyverne.

She could not think of these dark men as her husband did. To her they seemed subtle as women, imbued with a strange femininity despite their ruthlessness, their fierceness.





"You—doubtless you think we are barbarians?"

She looked up at him. At that moment she knew that it was the barbarian in him which attracted her, or at least the barbarous strain in him which was combined with something else.

"You are afraid of us, perhaps?" he added. "You think we are capable of everything?" He used the French expression, *capable de tout.* "Is it not so?"

"I—I think you might be."

They were still walking onward towards the gate of the desert. The voice of the river was in their ears, the silver of the moonbeams was about them. Benchaâlal's eyes went continually to the flashing fires of the diamonds that hung down to his companion's waist.

"And is it not better so? What is a man if he is not capable of all

when he feels all, when he desires all? Would you have his manners tame, his words slow, his face calm, when his heart is on fire, when his nature is calling, when his blood is crying out, crying out like the river there as it rushes towards the desert? It wants its freedom, and the man wants his; wants the liberty to be as he really is, to act no more, but to hate and to love as his blood tells him. The Englishman! He does not want all this. What does he want? Barbary sheep, mon Dieu! Barbary sheep!" He laughed low, as if to himself. "Well, then, in the name of Allah and of his Prophet, let the Englishman have his Barbary sheep, but let the Arab have"— he stopped, then he added, slowly — "his desire, the desire of his life."

Lady Wyverne felt as if his words were gusts of heat from a furnace coming to her fiercely. She knew

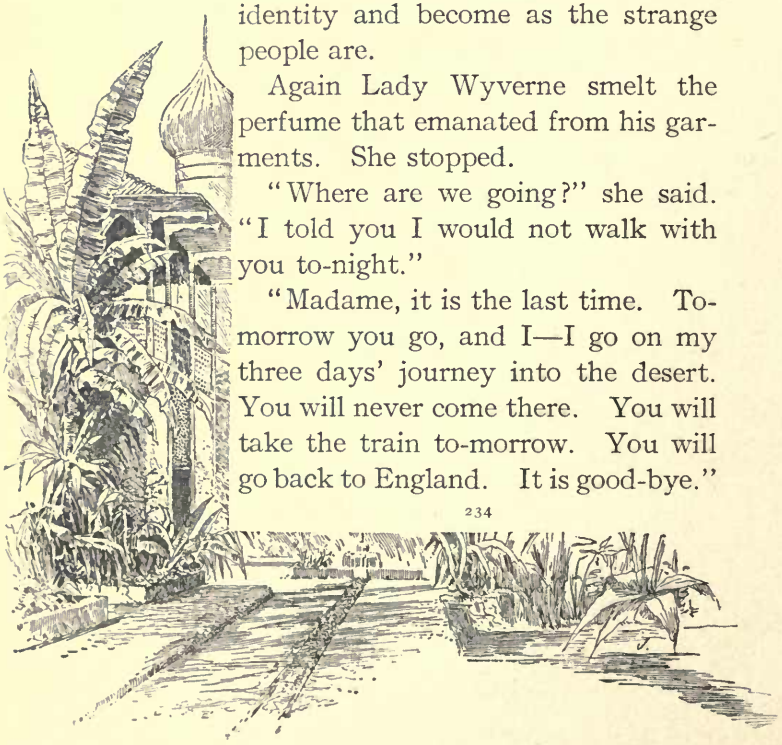


that she did not really care for the Spahi, yet whenever she was with him he forced her, as it were, into his atmosphere. Some men have this power. They spread a magic carpet. They carry you away, out of your window, over the tree-tops, over the seas, far off to the strange lands, where the voices are strange and the flowers strange, and you lose your identity and become as the strange people are.

Again Lady Wyverne smelt the perfume that emanated from his garments. She stopped.

"Where are we going?" she said. "I told you I would not walk with you to-night."

"Madame, it is the last time. To-morrow you go, and I—I go on my three days' journey into the desert. You will never come there. You will take the train to-morrow. You will go back to England. It is good-bye."



"Yes, it is good-bye."

Again she felt tempted. A longing to taste, just to taste, the mysterious African life assailed her, and her own existence presented itself to her as ineffably commonplace, insufferably empty. It was safe; yes, protected, but it was frightfully tame. Again she was the child tempted by the Celestial's pigtail.

"I know; but—"

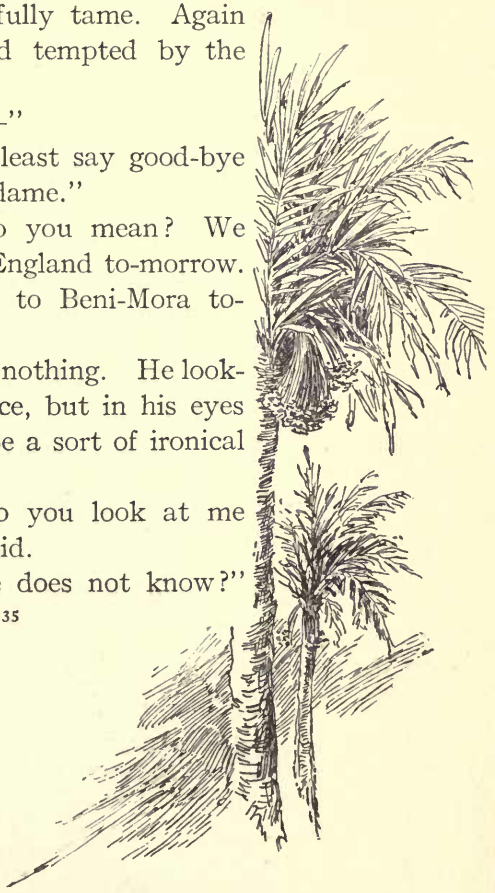
"You must at least say good-bye to the desert, madame."

"But—what do you mean? We are not going to England to-morrow. We are going on to Beni-Mora to-morrow."

Benchaâlal said nothing. He looked at her in silence, but in his eyes there seemed to be a sort of ironical pity and surprise.

"Why—why do you look at me like that?" she said.

"But—madame does not know?"



"Know what?"

"That monsieur turns his back on the desert?"

"I know nothing. I don't understand."

"Then I had better be silent. Madame will know to-morrow."

"Tell me now. Tell me at once."

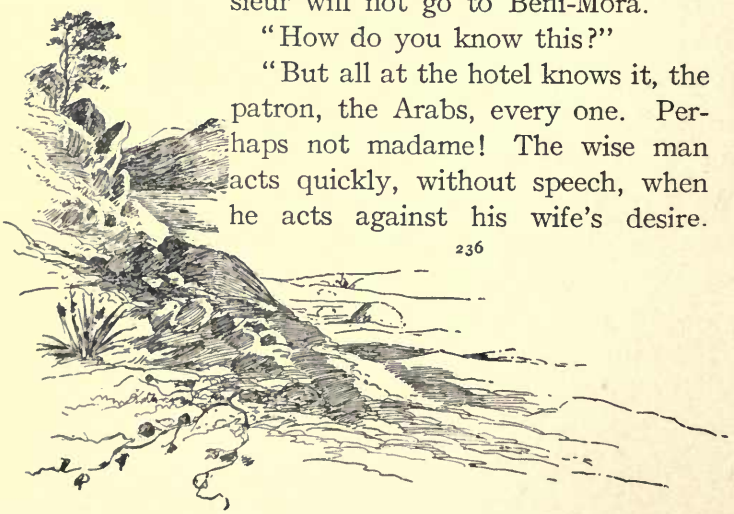
"To-day—did you not notice anything strange in monsieur's manner to-day?" said Benchaâlal, drawing a bow at a venture, very craftily.

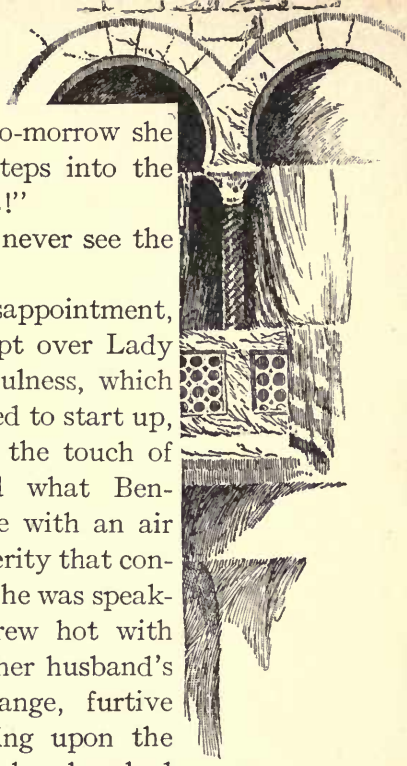
"Yes, I—what did it mean?"

"That monsieur is tired of Africa, that to-morrow he turns his back to the desert. In Beni-Mora there are no Barbary sheep. Therefore, monsieur will not go to Beni-Mora."

"How do you know this?"

"But all at the hotel knows it, the patron, the Arabs, every one. Perhaps not madame! The wise man acts quickly, without speech, when he acts against his wife's desire.





Madame will know. To-morrow she will know, when she steps into the train that goes to Tunis!"

"Then—then I shall never see the real desert."

A bitter sense of disappointment, almost of outrage, swept over Lady Wyverne. All the wilfulness, which had ruled so long, seemed to start up, like a wild creature at the touch of a whip. She believed what Benchaâlal said. He spoke with an air of almost surprised sincerity that convinced her at once that he was speaking the truth. She grew hot with anger. This was why her husband's manner had been strange, furtive with her in the morning upon the veranda. This was why he had tried to avoid her kiss. He had had his sport, his pleasure, and now he was going to take her away. She was to yield to his convenience, to forego her desire.



Patches of red came out on her delicate cheeks and her eyes shone. Without saying another word she walked on again.

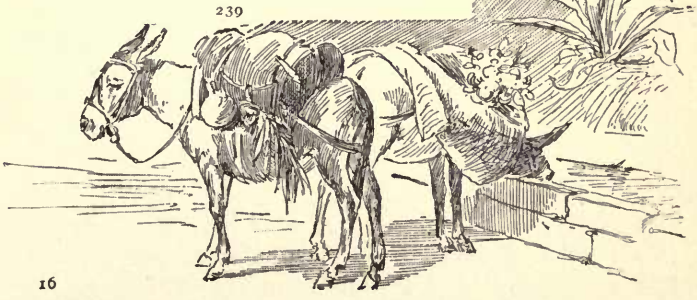
And as she walked she thought that her desire of the desert had increased. Now that she was not to know the desert, it seemed to her that it was the one thing which she longed to know.

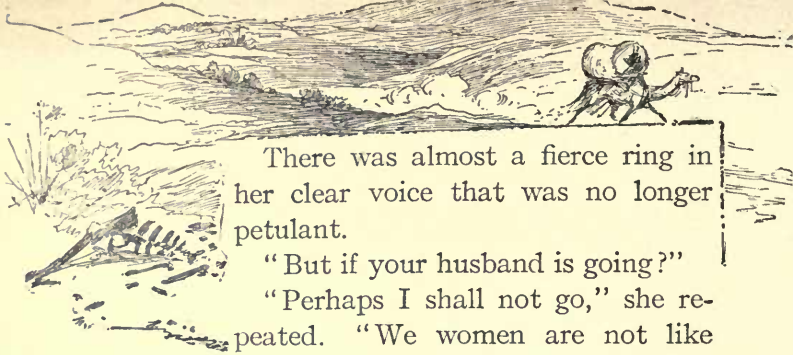
Benchaâlal kept close beside her as the gorge narrowed. He read her feelings, marked his success. But he was too clever to dwell upon Sir Claude. Instead he turned to another subject. He spoke of the desert, of the strange life there, of the freedom, the adventure, the passion. And he spoke sincerely, for he loved his home, although, like many Arabs, he loved also the vices of cities now that he had begun to know them. He strove to kindle a blaze in the imagination of the woman beside him,

a blaze that would rival the blaze of those diamonds which hung at her neck, moving as she moved, sparkling in the moonlight. They had given a mysterious impetus to his desire which no one not an Oriental could have comprehended. He connected them with their wearer, their brilliance with the brilliance of her angry eyes, their fairness with the fairness of her face, their glitter with the glitter of her hair. In his mind he compared her to a jewel, to a chain of jewels. And as he longed for them he longed for her. He desired to take them into his hands and to take her into his heart. And he spoke like one of the Goblin men of Goblin market. And she listened as to the voice of a Goblin man.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, at last. "If you were not going to-morrow! Going back to England!"

"Perhaps I shall not go," she said.





There was almost a fierce ring in her clear voice that was no longer petulant.

"But if your husband is going?"

"Perhaps I shall not go," she repeated. "We women are not like women who are veiled. Western women are not slaves."

"But he will do what he chooses. I saw it in his eyes when I spoke with him by the river."

"He is not my master."

"I should be your slave."

They were near the mouth of the gorge now, and were walking at the base of that mountain on whose summit was the rock shaped like a resting camel.

"You must not speak to me like that," Lady Wyverne said.

"I should be your slave," he repeated, as if he had not heard her.

"But," she answered, with a faint-hearted attempt to restore a light

tone to their conversation—"but in this land it is the women who are like slaves."

"The dark-skinned women! But you—you are fair. You are like a diamond, one of those diamonds you wear."

His hand went out towards the swinging chain instinctively, but he drew it back, making a strong effort to control himself.

"The dark men worship the fair women. You are like the silver moon. You are like the sun when it shines upon the great prayer after the fast of Ram-a-dan. When I see you I am looking at the East. Do you not know it?"

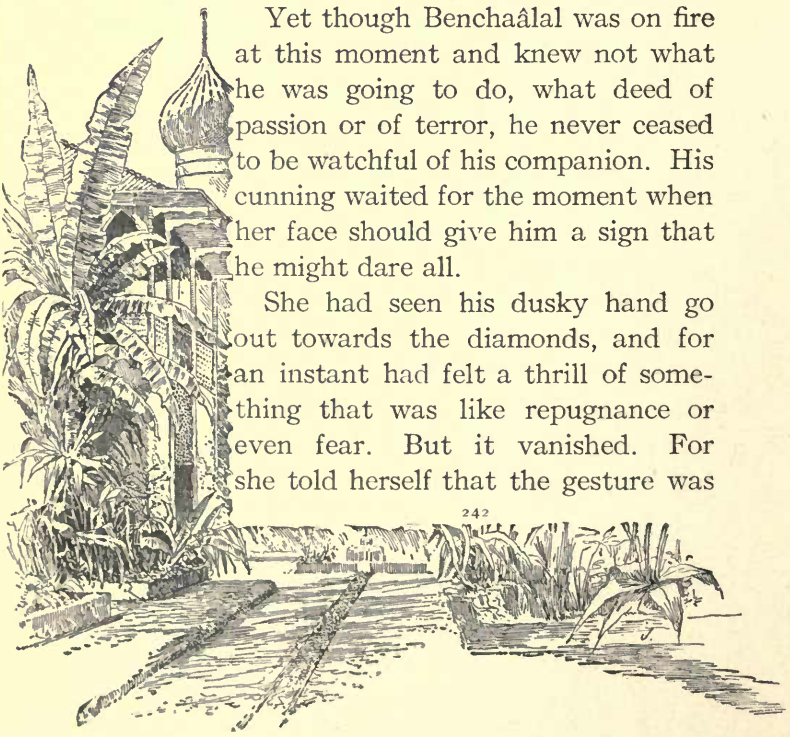
All the time he spoke he was watching her craftily. And yet he was fiercely moved, and by a double desire of possession. Two hearts seemed beating in his breast, the heart of a robber and the heart of a lover. The



two controlling passions of the Arab were simultaneously alive within him. At that moment he was capable of falling at Lady Wyverne's feet and giving up his life to her, if she would yield to him. But he was also capable of murdering her for the chain of jewels at her neck if she resisted him. And this is only to say that he was Arab.

Yet though Benchaâlal was on fire at this moment and knew not what he was going to do, what deed of passion or of terror, he never ceased to be watchful of his companion. His cunning waited for the moment when her face should give him a sign that he might dare all.

She had seen his dusky hand go out towards the diamonds, and for an instant had felt a thrill of something that was like repugnance or even fear. But it vanished. For she told herself that the gesture was



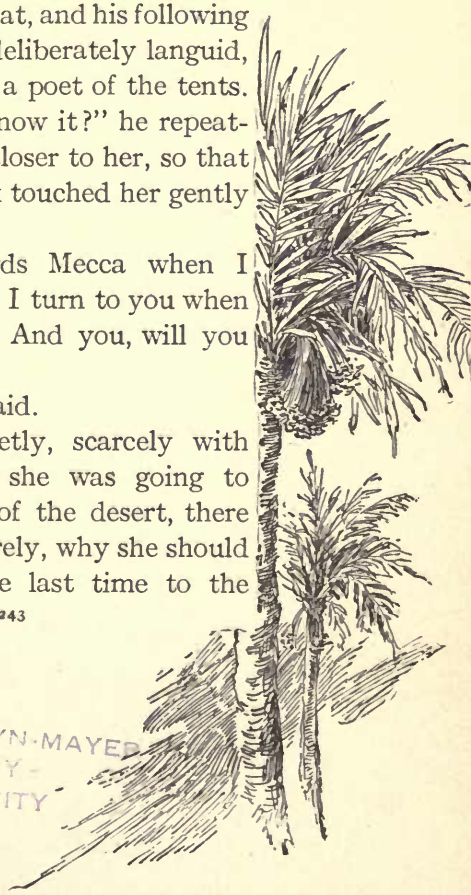
an absolutely natural one, according with the comparison he made. Nevertheless, there had been something in the look of his hand, as it darted out from the folds of his garments, which had startled her and left her more highly strung than she had been before. He knew that, and his following speech had been deliberately languid, like the speech of a poet of the tents.

"Do you not know it?" he repeated, going a little closer to her, so that his swinging cloak touched her gently as he walked.

"I turn towards Mecca when I pray at dawn, but I turn to you when I pray at night. And you, will you hear my prayer?"

"Hush!" she said.

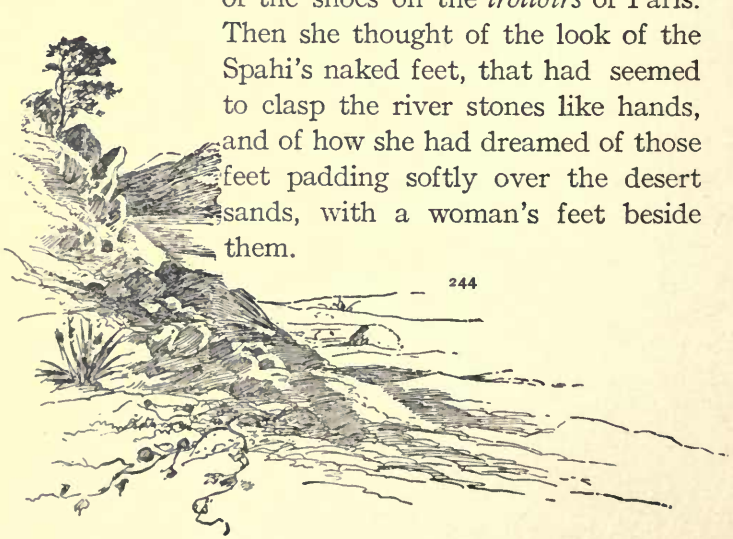
She spoke quietly, scarcely with reprobation. As she was going to see a last vision of the desert, there was no reason, surely, why she should not listen for the last time to the

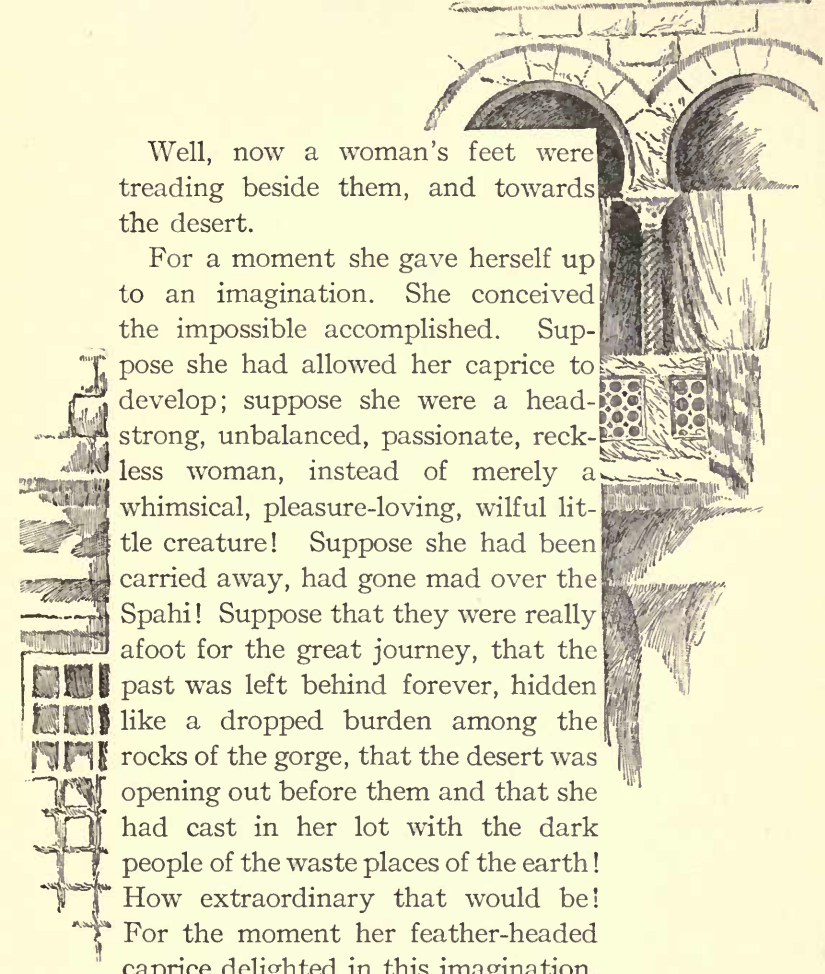


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voice of the desert. And in this desert man she personified the desert for the moment. To-morrow the vision would have faded from her eyes and the voice would have died away forever from her ears. Once more she would have resumed her life with Crumpet. Her sense of resentment against her husband, too, restrained her resentment from falling on another.

In answer to her pretence of rebuke he was suddenly silent. They walked on very slowly. She heard the tap of her high-heeled shoes on the hard road, and thought of the tap of the shoes on the *trottoirs* of Paris. Then she thought of the look of the Spahi's naked feet, that had seemed to clasp the river stones like hands, and of how she had dreamed of those feet padding softly over the desert sands, with a woman's feet beside them.





Well, now a woman's feet were treading beside them, and towards the desert.

For a moment she gave herself up to an imagination. She conceived the impossible accomplished. Suppose she had allowed her caprice to develop; suppose she were a headstrong, unbalanced, passionate, reckless woman, instead of merely a whimsical, pleasure-loving, wilful little creature! Suppose she had been carried away, had gone mad over the Spahi! Suppose that they were really afoot for the great journey, that the past was left behind forever, hidden like a dropped burden among the rocks of the gorge, that the desert was opening out before them and that she had cast in her lot with the dark people of the waste places of the earth! How extraordinary that would be! For the moment her feather-headed caprice delighted in this imagination,



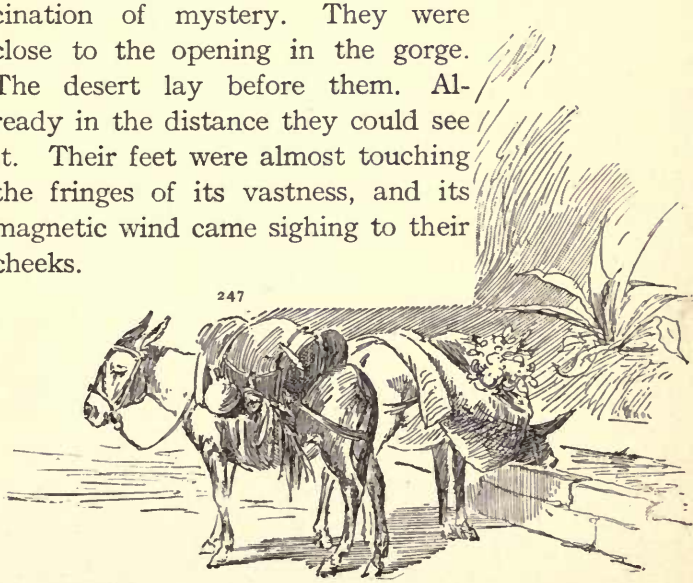
played with it like a child with a colored ball that floats upward on the wind. She forced herself to live in this dream. Yes, it was so. Her old life was gone forever. She had done the strangest thing that ever woman had done. How they would talk of her in her old haunts, in the boudoirs of Paris and of London, on the race-courses of Newmarket and of Ascot, on the moors of Scotland under the misty mountains! What would they say of her? Did it matter? They were nothing to her any more, these friends and acquaintances of the past. Their talk would never again be her talk, nor their fads and their crazes hers. From the tyrannies of fashion she was forever freed, from the changing modes of the hour and of life. To the immutable East she was setting her face, to the land that does not change!

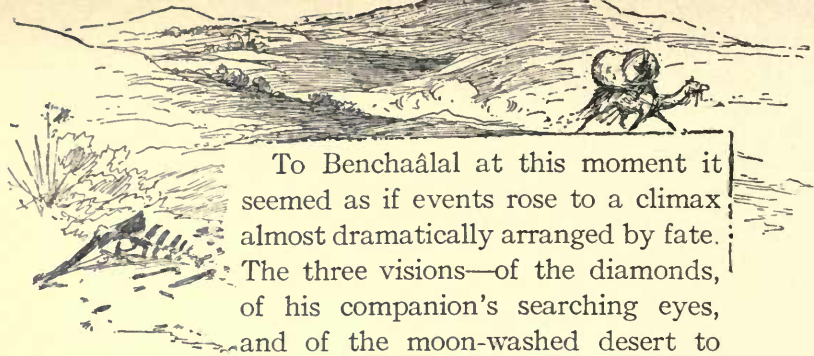
For the moment she was so much

under the influence of her own deliberate imagination that she almost was the woman she thought of, and he, the Spahi, almost became to her that woman's master. Or slave? Which was it? Which would it be?

Which would it be?

As she asked herself this question she glanced at Benchaâlal with an expression in her eyes which had never been in them before when they had looked at him, an expression of deep inquiry, so feminine and yet so searching that it startled him, and added to her personality a charm that hitherto it had lacked, the fascination of mystery. They were close to the opening in the gorge. The desert lay before them. Already in the distance they could see it. Their feet were almost touching the fringes of its vastness, and its magnetic wind came sighing to their cheeks.





To Benchaâlal at this moment it seemed as if events rose to a climax almost dramatically arranged by fate. The three visions—of the diamonds, of his companion's searching eyes, and of the moon-washed desert to which he belonged—gave themselves to his gaze almost as one. They were blended together, fused into a whole. And that whole — he must have it. It must be his, now. He could wait for it no longer. The jewels, the woman, and the desert—they must belong to him, now.

His dark hand shot out again and closed on Lady Wyverne's hand. He did not speak, but the grasp of his hand frightened her It told her unmistakably that she was in danger. It was arbitrary. It was the hand of a robber as well as of a lover, a hand that could tear to pieces as easily, and perhaps almost as happily, as it could caress. And his

eyes now, as they met hers, answered the question hers had asked them, answered it with a fierce frankness that left no room for doubt. The barbarian forced his way up into the light, splitting through the thin crust of civilized culture that had covered him, as an iron bar splits through a pane of glass.

The desert came upon Lady Wyverne and the desert man came upon her, showing himself exactly as he was.

When his hand seized her hand she instinctively recoiled. Instantly his other hand shot out, and seized, not her other hand, but the diamond chain at her neck.

The whole man was nakedly revealed in those two quickly following actions.

As the Spahi's thin fingers closed upon the diamonds Lady Wyverne knew the depth of her folly, and

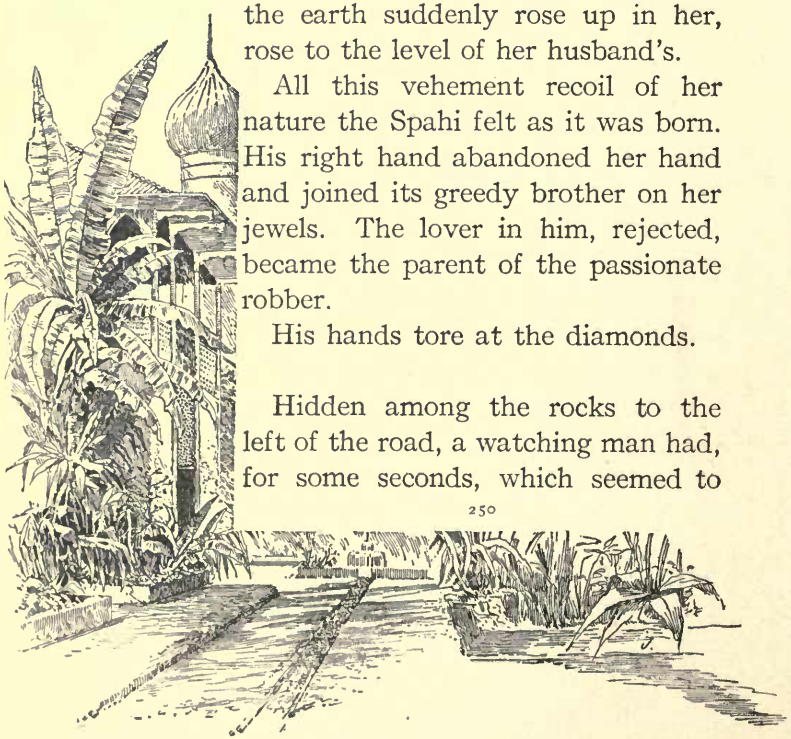


there came to her a sickening horror in which the desert was condemned with the man. Tradition rushed back to the place in her nature from which her caprice had ousted it. Her heart clamored for the blessed protection of the commonplace which she had been rejecting, and the peculiar disgust which so many white-skinned people feel towards the dark races of the earth suddenly rose up in her, rose to the level of her husband's.

All this vehement recoil of her nature the Spahi felt as it was born. His right hand abandoned her hand and joined its greedy brother on her jewels. The lover in him, rejected, became the parent of the passionate robber.

His hands tore at the diamonds.

Hidden among the rocks to the left of the road, a watching man had, for some seconds, which seemed to



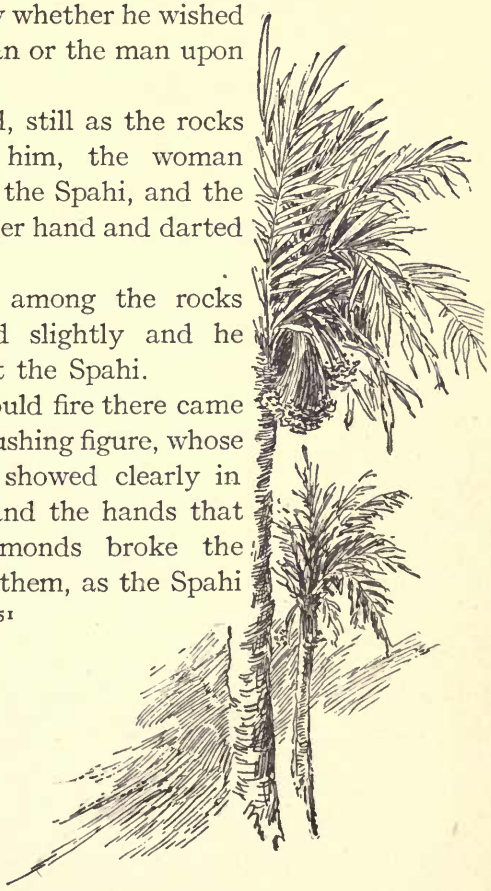
him long nights of impenetrable blackness, held a gun to his shoulder with a steady hand, his finger upon the trigger. One reason alone had prevented him from firing, a strange but tremendous indecision in his heart.

He did not know whether he wished to shoot the woman or the man upon the road.

While he waited, still as the rocks which concealed him, the woman started back from the Spahi, and the Spahi's hand left her hand and darted at her jewels.

Then the man among the rocks knew. He moved slightly and he levelled his gun at the Spahi.

But before he could fire there came upon the Spahi a rushing figure, whose bright-green robe showed clearly in the moonbeams; and the hands that clutched the diamonds broke the chain that united them, as the Spahi



sank down upon the road with a knife between his shoulders.

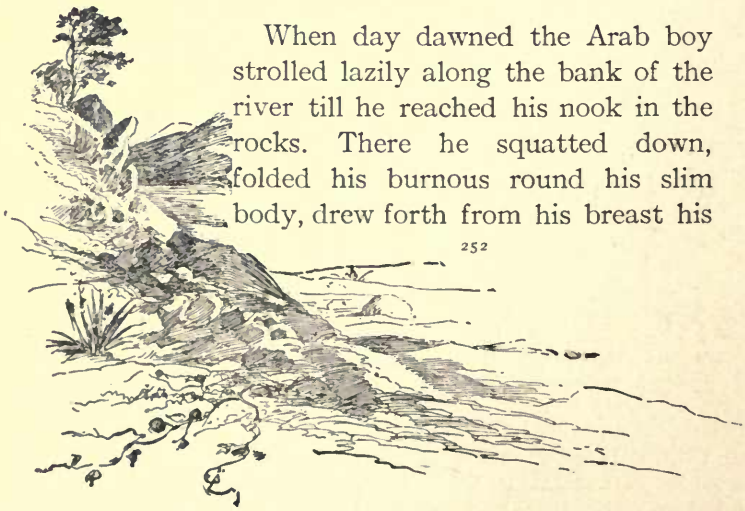
"Allah! Allah! Allah!"

The long, fierce cry went up in the night.

Sir Claude leaped into the road. As his arms went round his wife the cry rose up again.

"Allah! Allah! Allah!"

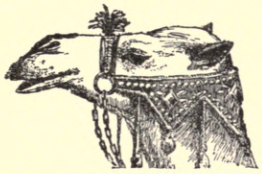
Then it died away in a whimper that was like an animal's, as the mad Marabout dropped down to his knees beside the Spahi's body, and began carefully to pick up, one by one, the jewels that were scattered over it, gleaming in the moonbeams like crystals of the desert.



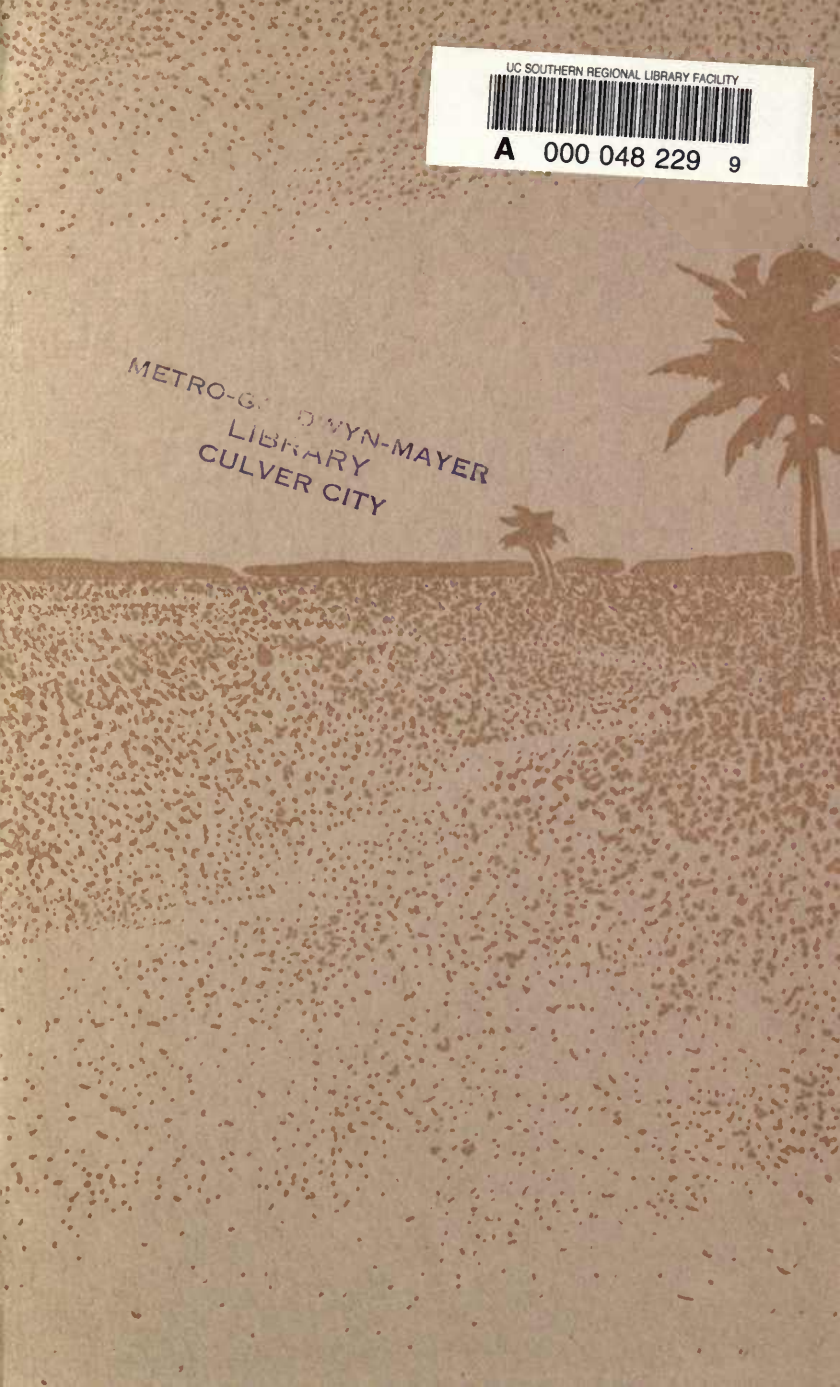
When day dawned the Arab boy strolled lazily along the bank of the river till he reached his nook in the rocks. There he squatted down, folded his burnous round his slim body, drew forth from his breast his

little flute of reed, and, putting his dusky fingers to the holes, sent forth airily to the sun the melody that was like caprice personified in music.

THE END




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